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its 7000i system, p46

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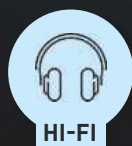
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04



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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: April 19, 2018



IMAX comes home, p36

Welcome

When home cinema was in its infancy, the idea of self-updating hardware would have seemed like the stuff of science-fiction. Yet in 2018 evolving products are the norm – TVs, projectors, Blu-ray players and AV receivers are all 'net-connected, and this allows manufacturers to push firmware updates to introduce new features or squish operational bugs.

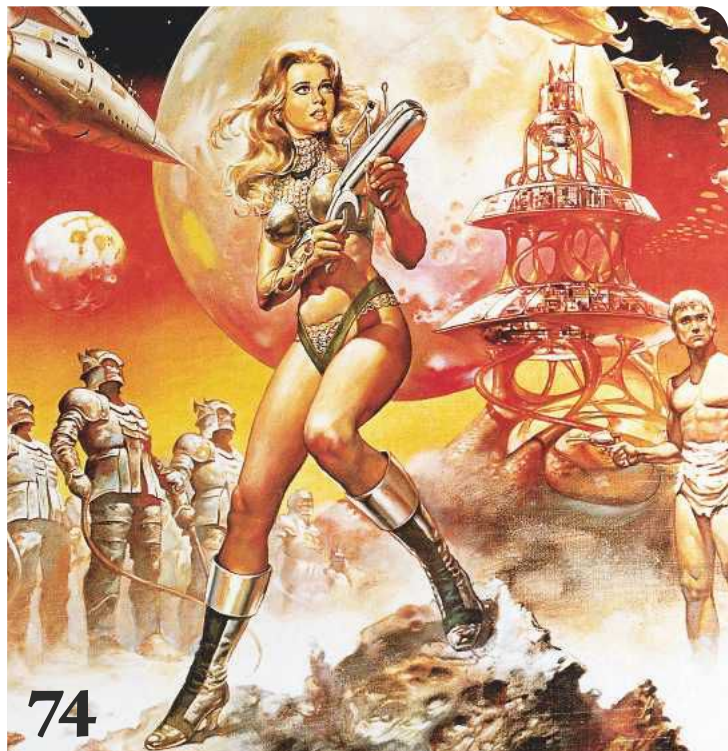


Generally this is good for the end user. But it does mean **there's a fluidity about home cinema kit that never used to exist.** In this issue we look at a Sony 4K Blu-ray player (p60) that will be updated to support Dolby Vision in the Summer, a Marantz receiver (p42) due HDMI feature upgrades any time now, and a Google smart speaker (p68) that will undoubtedly undergo extensive functionality tweaks during its lifetime. Exciting, yes, but wasn't it simpler when everything just worked out of the box?

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



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WIN!
Damson S-Series
Dolby Atmos
speaker system
worth £800!
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'A cracking all-rounder, mixing superb features with an articulate, believable sound'



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BULLETIN

→ **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS** ACOUSTIC ENERGY 300 Series speaker range unveiled
FILMSTRUCK CURZON VOD service aimed at cinephiles hits the UK **4K TV** Which screen size is the most popular? **WEBWATCH** Trailers and tech from around the 'net **NEWS X10** The hottest news stories in bite-sized chunks **JUMANJI** Reboot/sequel aims for 4K BD magic & MORE!

Premium player

Panasonic DMP-UB9000 → www.panasonic.co.uk



Set to sell later this year for an expected £1,000, the DMP-UB9000 sees Panasonic ushering in a new flagship 4K disc-spinner capable of both Dolby Vision and HDR10+ playback. A full-width, aluminium-chassis design (and weighing 8kg), the player supplements the expected twin HDMI ports with a 7.1 analogue audio output, and stereo XLR output. Beneath the hood, 'audiophile components' and the latest generation of Panasonic's HCX image processor aim to ensure a premium AV experience. See p10 for more...

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A grand idea

Acoustic Energy 300 Series → www.acoustic-energy.co.uk

Acoustic Energy's new 300 Series promises powerful, refined sonics matched to an elegant design – both the £1,000 floorstanding AE309 and AE300 standmounts (£600) employ slender cabinets with walnut veneer, piano black or white lacquer finishes. Shared across both models is a new 5in aluminium midbass driver (used as a pair on the AE309), and 1in aluminium tweeter with Wide Dispersion Technology waveguide. Rear-side slot ports aim to fine-tune bass performance.



The AE309 claims a low-end reach of 38Hz

Xeo range revamped



Dynaudio has added two new models to its Xeo range of active wireless speakers, replacing the previous Xeo 4 and Xeo 6 with the Xeo 20 and Xeo 30 respectively. Improvements include an updated crossover and DSP engine, and larger cabinet designs to bolster bass response. The entire Xeo lineup also now includes optical digital audio and analogue phono inputs (the former catering to 24-bit/96kHz sources) and in-built Bluetooth support. www.dynaudio.com/uk

Hitachi goes large with 4K HDR



Bigscreen bargain-hunters are the target of Hitachi's 75HL16T64U, a 75in LED-lit LCD TV with native 4K panel and HDR10 playback, and a price tag of £1,500. An Argos exclusive, the set integrates a Freeview Play tuner for access to UK terrestrial catchup apps, while Netflix and YouTube are among the services supported by the brand's smartVue platform. Connectivity appears a little stripped back, with three HDMI inputs rather than the typical four, but that may be all you need... www.argos.co.uk

Struck by classic cinema

A new VOD service 'curated for film lovers by film lovers' hits the UK

Those looking for more choice when it comes to movies-on-demand may cheer the announcement that FilmStruck Curzon, an online subscription VOD service, has arrived on the UK's virtual shores.

Brought to you by a rollcall of joint-venture partners, including Warner Bros, Turner International, The Criterion Collection, Curzon Artificial Eye and Kew Media Group, it promises audience access to a 'diverse collection of cinema's most iconic and ground-breaking films.'

The service isn't exactly new – the original US platform launched in 2016, known simply as FilmStruck. However, its debut in the UK sees the addition of the Curzon moniker, due to the involvement of the arthouse cinema chain and its distribution arm, Curzon Artificial Eye. The Curzon Home Cinema VOD platform remains a separate

entity, focused on more recent theatrical releases for online movie feasting.

Culturally important

FilmStruck Curzon aims to carve out its own slot with a library of classic films which, according to Aksel Van Der Wal, EVP of Digital Ventures and Innovation at Turner, are 'neither just niche or just mainstream' but have become 'culturally important and had an impact on audiences all over the world.'

Vanessa Bookman, UK Vice President of Content and Creative at Turner, explains the service's appeal to cinephiles: 'Film titles go back over 90 years with Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* and Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* [both 1925], right up until 2014 with Taika Waititi's *What We Do in the Shadows*. Our collection of films have been chosen because they are iconic, important, independent or influential and, in their way, have shaped cinema history in some form.'

A further browse of titles also reveals gems that might be on your must-see list, including Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999), Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours...* trilogy (1993-4), and Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973). And in addition to back catalogues of the aforementioned Turner International, Warner Bros., and Curzon Artificial Eye,

34 titles have been selected from The Criterion Collection's restored library, with subscribers also treated to its complete supplemental materials, or 'Criterion Editions'.

Viewing platforms for FilmStruck Curzon so far include Amazon Fire TV, iOS and Android devices, Apple TV and via a web browser, with more to be added, HCC was told. The price for subscription is £5.99 per month, or £59.90 annually.

FilmStruck Curzon says its highest quality streams are 1080p video with Dolby Digital 5.1.



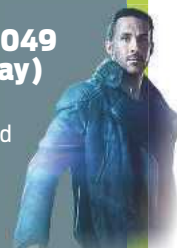
The Criterion Collection is one of the service's content partners

Playlist...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

Blade Runner 2049 (Ultra HD Blu-ray)

The combination of stunning 4K visuals and gobsmackingly great Dolby Atmos audio make revisiting this epic sci-fi even more pleasurable on UHD Blu-ray.



All I See is You (R2 DVD)



Although denied a Blu-ray release here in the UK, Marc Forster's lurid psychodrama is still well worth tracking down on DVD.

Brain Food (Region B BD)



This superb extra from 88 Films' *A Cat in the Brain* Blu-ray explores the later, neglected part of Lucio Fulci's filmmaking career.

Requiem (R2 DVD)



Strange things are afoot in a Welsh village in this supremely spooky and stylish six-part BBC drama.

Royal Rumble 2018 (All-region BD)



The first ever women's 'Rumble' is the standout match in one of the best WWE events in years.

At the 'plex...

Heading out to see a flick?
Catch these this month

Pacific Rim: Uprising

March 23: John Boyega headlines the cast in this sequel that picks up the story a decade on from the 2013 original. Expect to see a new team of Jaeger pilots going up against more giant monsters and one of their own, gone rogue!

Ready Player One

March 29: Steven Spielberg tackles the world of Virtual Reality in this bigscreen adaptation of Ernest Cline's bestselling sci-fi novel. If nothing else, you can have fun spotting the references to other movies, TV shows and games crammed into the film.

Ghost Stories

April 06: Steel yourself for a trio of terrifying tales of the supernatural as Andy Nyman and Jeremy Dyson's play makes the leap from stage to the screen. If it's even half as good as the source material then fright fans are in for a treat.

Panasonic's 4K ambition

Brand unveils flagship UHD Blu-ray player and HDR10+ equipped TVs

Panasonic is taking on Oppo with a new premium Ultra HD Blu-ray player, and will make HDR10+ dynamic metadata standard on all its 2018 4K HDR TVs. The company, intent on raising the stakes in performance AV, made the announcements at its annual European Trade Convention, held in Palma. **HCC went along for a closer look...**

We first got wind of the UB9000 player at CES, but seeing the first prototype confirms that this is the most significant Blu-ray offering yet from the brand, upping the stakes when it comes to heavyweight design and audiophile connectivity. It's scheduled to arrive at UK retailers this Autumn.

The deck features twin HDMI outputs, but uses an interim technical solution to deliver dynamic metadata over HDMI v2.0. Panasonic recommends that buyers connect the UB9000 directly to a 4K screen which supports HDR10+ or Dolby Vision, rather than go through an AV receiver.

Panasonic Blu-ray guru Kazuhiko Kouno told **HCC** that while HDMI 2.0-capable AV receivers can technically transmit HDR10+ metadata, much depends on individual hardware implementations.

'In general, AV receivers can handle only data on HDMI related to the function which they support,' he says. 'If so, many current AV receivers may not be able to transmit HDR10+ metadata at the moment.' Certain brands of receiver could require a firmware update to enable HDR10+ passthrough, he added.

LCD plus point

HDR10+, which allows for more accurate scene-by-scene tone mapping when a display is unable to deliver the



Kazuhiko Kouno: 'Many current AV receivers may not be able to transmit HDR10+ metadata at the moment'

spectral highlight (or lowlights) of the original source, is a spec-sheet tick not only on Panasonic's imminent 2018 OLED range

[see **HCC** #283] but on its more mass-market LED LCD TV lineup, too. Leading the charge will be the FX750, joined by the FX740 (a PC World/Currys exclusive), FX700 and entry-level FX600 screens.

Unlike the UB9000, none of these TVs support Dolby Vision. HLG is offered, however.

During the Panasonic Convention, comparisons were held of an FX750 running HDR10+ footage alongside a set displaying HDR10. The FX750 appeared to deliver a sharper, better contrasted picture with richer colours.

The TV will be available in 43in to 75in screen sizes (other FX models max out at 65in), and features Panasonic's Local Dimming Pro tech with advanced interpolation modes to improve motion handling. It packs the same HCX processor as Panasonic's incoming FZ950 and FZ800 OLED flatscreens.

While none of the LCD LED models feature a full array backlight (a technology being pushed

by both Sony and LG this year), both the FX600 and FX700 have 'Digitally Enhanced' local dimming designed to improve contrast. The FX700 and upwards also incorporate wide colour gamut panels.



HDR10+ features on all Panasonic's 2018 4K HDR TVs

Feel the Force of Dolby Vision

The Last Jedi to be the first *Star Wars* film released on Ultra HD Blu-ray

Walt Disney and Lucasfilm have revealed that *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* will make its home entertainment debut in the UK this Easter.

While a new *Star Wars* release is always cause for celebration, ...*The Last Jedi* is particularly exciting as it marks the first film in the sci-fi saga to be released on Ultra HD Blu-ray. And, unlike the two Marvel 4K discs it has released to date, Disney has confirmed that ...*The Last Jedi* will be its first UHD Blu-ray to offer Dolby Atmos audio and Dolby Vision HDR.

Fans can look forward to plenty of bonus goodies on the film's Blu-ray platter. These



Star Wars fans will now want to know when other films in the franchise will receive a 4K makeover

include the feature-length documentary *The Director and the Jedi*; a chat-track from writer-director Rian Johnson; a trio of scene breakdowns (*Lighting the Spark: Creating the Space Battle*, *Snoke and Mirrors* and *Showdown on Crait*); two additional featurettes (*Andy Serkis Live! (One Night Only)* and *Balance of the Force*); and 14 deleted scenes with intros and optional commentary.

Star Wars: The Last Jedi will be available to own on DVD, Blu-ray, 3D Blu-ray and Ultra HD Blu-ray from April 9, with a Digital Download release in the preceding weeks.

Now with more depth
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The new Q Series hi-fi speakers

The eighth iteration of this successful range continues to be centred on KEF's legendary Uni-Q driver array, and is now enhanced with a new system design, beefier low-frequency drivers and a new damped tweeter loading tube. The result is superior bass performance and an even more detailed natural sound. Listen for yourself and experience pleasure in high resolution.

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Extras...

Small items that could make a big impression...

Buffy the Vampire Slayer FAQ



Outside of *Star Trek* there are very few TV shows that have had as much written about them as Joss

Whedon's groundbreaking horror series. While this means this new £17 guide doesn't really cover any fresh ground, it makes a good stab at taking an all-encompassing look at every aspect of *Buffy*-dom, from the film and TV show to the canonical comic book follow-ups.

LEGO The Hulkbuster: Ultron Edition



Celebrate the arrival of Marvel's *Avengers: Infinity War* on the bigscreen with this

new LEGO model of Iron Man's Hulkbuster armour. Measuring over 25cm tall (excluding base) and consisting of 1,363 pieces, the finished model features a light-up chest, interchangeable arms and an exclusive Iron Man: Mark 43 minifigure. Grab one for your cinema room for £120.

BFI Film Classics: Pandora's Box



Silent film expert and former HCC staffer Pamela Hutchinson opens the lid on *Pandora's Box* in this

welcome analysis of filmmaker G.W. Pabst's 1929 masterpiece. Not limiting herself to what appears on screen, Hutchinson also explores the lives of the film's director and its iconic leading lady, Louise Brooks. Available now for around £13.

A glimpse into the future

65in televisions to become mainstream, as 8K waits in the wings

65in flatscreens are on the verge of becoming mainstream as Chinese panel makers drive down the cost of manufacturing. So states Paul Gray, Research Director at IHS Markit. It's all part of a massive global TV business reset.

Speaking at Philips' recent European TV Conference in Amsterdam, Gray said new industry data confirms that the most popular size for 4K TV buyers is 55in, but the larger 65in category is also growing fast.

'The reason? A massive amount of LCD capacity is being built in China, by panel fabs that are producing very large substrates optimised for larger sizes,' he explains. 'We will soon see prices become extremely affordable, allowing 65in to become a mainstream size.'

This giant screen boom isn't just down to manufacturing economics, though. The sheer abundance of 4K cinematic TV content is driving interest. 'Consumers really do get the idea that if you want more pixels you need a bigger screen,' he says. 'We live in gilded times in terms of hardware and content. People are racing to the top for the first time in a long time, both technically and creatively. Netflix will spend \$8bn this year on content. TV is being shot with the same budget as movies, with the same calibre of direction and script writing.'

Bigscreen means 4K

Choice is expanding too. Currently there are over 30 linear Ultra HD TV channels available in Western Europe, and many are looking to HDR. 'Broadcasters love it. We will see a big shift this year as it makes sports content much more watchable,' claims Gray.

It also seems North America is hot on the heels of China in terms of 4K panel consumption. 'There was a huge fashion for more pixels in China, even with no content. But North America has caught up.



Paul Gray: 'We live in gilded times in terms of hardware and content. People are racing to the top for the first time in a long time'

They are very close indeed in terms of penetration.

'From now on, if you're going to buy a 55in or bigger TV, it's going to be 4K. You won't have a choice because the panel makers have stopped making other sizes. That's not to say 40in-48in isn't an acceptable size; many people don't have the space or want to move the furniture for a very big telly.'

And there are big global variations in taste. Consumers in China will move everything to accommodate a 65in screen, revealed Gray, whereas in Japan smaller sets are still common, and Western Europe is somewhere in the middle.

The flatscreen paradox

IHS Markit reports that 100million 4K televisions are expected to ship in 2018, rising to 130m in 2021. But what of the future? Gray predicts the 8K revolution will be dominated by China because of indigenous panel production. 'However, China doesn't have the content,' he says. 'That will come from Japan, where they buy tiny TVs that won't be 8K. One day we'll work our way through this paradox.'

But if you're planning on jumping onboard with 8K, you'd best start rearranging your room. Gray reveals that the TV industry is looking to make 80in the entry size for 8K, and the complexity of getting it into the house will make buying it more like a large piece of furniture than traditional consumer electronics.

And don't hope for much native 8K content to watch either. 'We don't expect any 8K broadcasts in Europe until 2025 at the earliest. There are huge technical problems to be solved,' he cautions.



65in 8K screens may give way to an 80in 'entry size'

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Desktop divas

Wharfedale has introduced a new active Bluetooth speaker pairing to replace its previous DS-1. According to the brand, the new DS-2s are 'proper two-way hi-fi speakers shrunk to desktop size,' and employ a 0.75in silk dome tweeter and 3in midbass driver. They are available in a choice of black or white finishes, and priced £180.

2 Arrow deal for Third Window

There's good news for fans of Third Window Films, one of the distributors affected by the shuttering of Fusion Media Sales that we reported on last issue. Third Window Films (and longtime partner Terracotta Distribution) has entered into a new sales and distribution deal with Arrow Films. This promises to provide them with a much larger distribution network, including the Arrow Channel on Amazon and the Arrow Online Store.

3 Pirate's big payout

A Staffordshire-based film pirate has been given a 16-month jail sentence and ordered to pay £567,000 to authorities (alongside a further £35,879 in costs) after pleading guilty to importing fake DVDs from China and selling them as the real thing on eBay.

4 Fire TV adds voice control

Amazon has added far-field voice control to all generations of its Fire TV devices. Pairing your Fire TV or Fire TV Stick with an Amazon Echo speaker (which happens automatically when you ask Alexa a question that includes 'Fire TV') will now give you complete hands-free control of the streaming device.

5 'Are you not entertained?'

Ultra HD Blu-ray fans can look forward to such long-awaited treats as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, all four *Jurassic Park* films, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Gladiator*, *Braveheart*, *Fury*, and, ahem, *Mama Mia!* making their debut on the 4K disc format (in the US, at least) in the coming months. Sooner or later they'll get around to releasing *Jaws*...

6 Netflix coming to Sky Q

Netflix and Sky have finally put their differences aside long enough to agree a deal that will see the Netflix app made available on the satcaster's Sky Q boxes later this year. Pricing has yet to be confirmed, but Sky says that customers will be able to pay for Netflix as part of their Sky bill.

7 Home entertainment more popular than reading

According to recent figures released by the ERA (Entertainment Retailers Association), last year saw the British public spend more money (£7.2bn) on music, video and videogames than it did (£7.1bn) on books, magazines and newspapers – the first time in history this has ever happened.

8 Channel 4 HD exits Freesat

Freesat viewers will have noticed that Channel 4 HD and the All4 catchup app disappeared from the service towards the end of February. Channel 4 has said it pulled them both when changes to Freesat's charging structure would have 'led to a very significant cost increase'. Freesat bosses have since denied Channel 4's claims.

9 Extreme LED TVs hit UK

Sony's XF90 Series Ultra HD LED TV range, featuring its X1 Extreme image processing, is now available in the UK. Three screen sizes (55in, 65in and 75in) are offered, priced £1,700, £2,300 and £4,000 respectively.

10 Old Dark House gets a fresh lick of paint

Eureka Entertainment is bringing a new 4K restoration of James Whale's classic 1932 horror film *The Old Dark House* to selected UK cinemas on April 27, after which the film will join the Masters of Cinema Blu-ray range on May 21. Bonus features will include an interview with Sara Karloff (daughter of Boris) and three audio commentaries. The first pressing also boasts a Limited Edition O-Card with artwork by Graham Humphreys.



Premiere...

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Boyle does Bond?



Trainspotting director and Olympic opening ceremony planner Danny Boyle is the latest frontrunner to helm the next James Bond flick. The filmmaker, and collaborator John Hodge, are reportedly working on a fresh script for the movie.

Amazon hits the library

Amazon Studios keeps on shopping around for books to adapt into TV shows. Its latest acquisitions are Iain M. Banks's *Culture* sci-fi series and Stephen King's *Dark Tower* saga. Originally planned to follow on from the recent film adaptation (see p98), *The Dark Tower* series is now expected to be a complete reboot after the movie flopped at the box office.

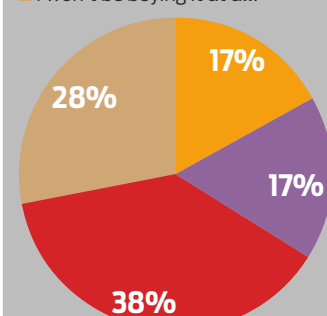
Batgirl loses director

The DC Extended Universe hit yet another hiccup recently with writer-director Joss Whedon walking away from the *Batgirl* movie. '*Batgirl* is such an exciting project... that it took me months to realise I really didn't have a story,' stated Whedon.

We asked...

Which format will you be buying *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* on?

- Blu-ray ■ 3D Blu-ray
- 4K/UHD Blu-ray
- I won't be buying it at all!



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Fun and games...

Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle → Sony Pictures Home Entertainment
→ DVD/Blu-ray/3D Blu-ray/Ultra HD Blu-ray

Having won over a new generation of fans (and lovers of the original too, judging from its phenomenal box office takings), the videogame-inspired reboot of 1995 family flick *Jumanji* is coming home on April 30. The *...Welcome to the Jungle* Blu-ray sees the film joined by five featurettes, a gag reel and a music video. As usual with Sony Pictures releases, the 4K platter improves on the Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics with a Dolby Atmos mix. Visuals also receive a Dolby Vision upgrade.



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Face to Face

Topics of discussion on the HCC Facebook page

Your favourite snow-based movies...



The Day After Tomorrow.
Paul Carter

Snow Dogs, The Thing and The Empire Strikes Back.
Victor Pulos

Where Eagles Dare.
Walter White

Muppets Christmas Carol and Cliffhanger.
Del Palmer

Always The Thing!
Robert Corrigan

What you're watching on your home cinema...



mother! Heard good and bad about it. If it's bad it still has Jennifer Lawrence and Atmos!

Richard Farrer

Thor: Ragnarok and *Geostorm*, both in 3D of course! Should be amazing!
Christopher Sedman

Took HCC's advice from last week and watched *Ace in the Hole* by Billy Wilder. I thought the BD was almost like watching a new film. The transfer handles depth, sharpness and grain extremely well. A great film done justice by Eureka. More like this please!
Alex Russell

I've ordered *Prometheus* by Luca Turilli's Rhapsody (Atmos edition, under your influence I might add).
Ambroise Dupuis

David Bowie – A Reality Tour.
Stephen Hill

Doctor Strange in 3D. Great fun, action and visual effects! Also *Transformers: The Last Knight* in 3D. Loved it.
Theo Coetzee



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Back of the 'net

Trailers, technology and more to check out on the web



Oh... him again

Hardest-working-man-in-Hollywood Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson is back at your multiplex mid-April in *Rampage*, which sees him re-team with *San Andreas* director Brad Peyton and doing battle with genetically-enhanced mega-monsters. The trailer makes it look like outrageous fun.
youtu.be/coOKvrsmQil



Ralph's back online

Considering its box office success, it's a surprise that the 2012 Disney animation *Wreck-It Ralph* has had to wait six years for a sequel. And even though a trailer has arrived for a follow-up, the flick still isn't due 'til November. This time around our pixellated hero breaks out of his arcade thanks to the internet...
youtu.be/iyAX5zHOvcg



'Why not me?'

American comedy troupe The Lonely Island launched this video to coincide with this year's Academy Awards. Via the medium of daft, puerile song and storyboarded movie stills, it asks the question we all ask around Oscar time – why don't popcorn flicks ever pick up any awards?
youtu.be/x7DssfaYi5w



The brains of the operation

Another fascinating behind-the-scenes video (using a montage of still images) from practical effects geniuses Amalgamated Dynamics, Inc (ADI). Here the subject is the monstrous 'brain bug' from Paul Verhoeven's 1997 sci-fi *Starship Troopers* – a thrilling creation that looks all the better for not being CG.
youtu.be/TYztHd8TizQ



Lightsaber sonics

Named *The Force of Sound*, this nicely edited and informative behind-the-scenes 26-minute documentary examines the sound design and production of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (and contains spoilers). Director Rian Johnson and supervising sound editor Ren Klyce feature.
<http://abcn.ws/2od2ttX>



BFI brings Brit revolution to BD

Woodfall Films, the 1950s/60s/70s UK outfit famous for its flicks *Tom Jones*, *Don't Look Back in Anger* and *Kes* (amongst others) is the subject of a season at BFI Southbank in April, and an eight-disc Blu-ray boxset in May. Here's a teaser trailer to get you in the mood.
youtu.be/8CSk-hfAqQE



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Sound & Vision: Bristol Show 2018

Team HCC reports from a UK AV show where home cinema made its presence felt

The Sound & Vision show, held every year in February in Bristol, has long been associated with two channel hi-fi, something borne out by a flick through the exhibitor list, which crams in plenty of well known (and not so well known) names from the stereo music world. But it's also a showcase for home cinema brands and technologies, and this year there was plenty of buzz around Dolby Atmos and gut-shaking subwoofers...

ACOUSTIC ENERGY

Acoustic Energy's suite was focused on a world premiere of its new 300 Series (see p8), with additional stand space given over to its smaller-scale 100 Series models. As usual, the brand played upon its UK heritage with a Union Jack rug across the floor; perhaps not as usual, it was demo'ing a pair of its AE309 floorstanders using some choice cuts from Black Sabbath's back-catalogue, whereas many corps prefer to beguile potential buyers with something a little more refined and easy on the ear. A brave choice then but a good one, as any speaker that can do justice to Tommy Iommi's distorted guitar licks and Ozzy Osbourne's wailed vocals can probably make light work of Adele. Powered by an AVI Lab Series integrated amp, and fed FLAC rips via a Marantz CD player, these £1,000-per-pair speakers sounded energetic and well-balanced.

BOWERS & WILKINS

B&W gave its revamped 700 Series an airing, taking listeners through the range from its 707 S2s (£800 per pair), to the flagship 702 S2 (£3,300 per pair), which catches the eye (and ears) with three dedicated 'Aerofoil Profile' bass drivers. All 700 models also deploy a new Carbon Dome tweeter developed specifically for the range, plus the 'Continuum Cone' mid-range designs previously reserved for the 800 Series Diamonds. We'll have a 5.1 review (adding B&W's also-new DB4S subwoofer) in our next issue.

CANTON

Away from its traditional hi-fi speakers, German manufacturer Canton used a room to showcase its DM range of soundbars and soundbases, and launch a new model. The DM5 soundbar is priced at £300, offers Bluetooth, digital and analogue audio inputs and subwoofer output, and is positioned to meet the demands of smaller rooms and TVs.

The full Elipson Prestige Facet range includes Atmos and dipole surround models



Acoustic Energy's AE309 (below): ready to rock...



Canton's new £300 DM5 soundbar targets living room setups

The brand will hope it can channel some of the performance power of its pricier DM75 soundbase, which was auditioned at the show – clips from Donnie Yen actioner *The Lost Bladesman* illustrated its impressive bass depth and high-frequency attack.

DALI

DALI's wireless active Callisto models (standmount and floorstander) made an appearance at Sound & Vision, though won't be on sale until later this year. Standard DALI features, such as wood-fibre drivers and twin tweeters, are retained but each speaker is powered by a 300W Class D amplifier and receives a 24-bit/96kHz wireless signal from an outboard DALI Sound Hub compatible with Bluesound's well-developed streaming platform. The hub also connects to wired sources, and works hand-in-hand with full app control. No pricing yet, but this looks set to be a premium proposition.

ELIPSON

Demonstrating a new range of speakers suited to both home cinema and hi-fi was Elipson. The Prestige Facet lineup uses less eye-catching designs than the brand's quirky, spherical Planet speakers, but still has interesting features, including distinctive driver surrounds designed to aid dispersion.

The range is also extensive. There are three floorstanders and two standmounts, supported by a subwoofer, centre and dedicated surround/Atmos options. There's also a powered version of the smaller 6B standmount with a Class D internal amplifier; Bluetooth, digital and analogue inputs allow it to work as a standalone unit.

FYNE AUDIO

This new speaker brand made a splash at Bristol with a collection of models including a flagship floorstander and step-down ranges offering everything a film fan needs to assemble a 5.1 array. Fyne Audio itself has an interesting story, being the new endeavour from a group of former Tannoy employees and engineers – the chosen name denoting the company's Scottish roots.

All the speakers were on 'static demo' (not running, in other words), with the sizable F1-10 dominating. The first model of Fyne's high-end lineup, this features a single IsoFlare driver, where a 3in titanium dome tweeter is mounted at the centre of a 10in midbass unit. Similar transducers (but smaller) are used on the company's more affordable F500 series, while traditional drivers are favoured in the entry-level F300 series. AV system builders get a choice of three subwoofers.

JAMO

Thanks to a distribution deal with Henley Audio, Jamo is freshly returned to the UK after a few years' absence, and its Studio 8 Series should quicken the pulses of object-based audio fans.

The lineup features three floorstanding models, two standmounts, a centre and two subs, with Jamo favouring 'aluminized polyfiber' drivers partnered with soft dome tweeters on the passive models. A notable feature of the floorstanders is that they can have an S 8 ATM Atmos upfiring module attached to the top, fed via a second set of terminals at the foot of the speaker for better cable management. Pricing is keen too – a full system with Atmos modules using the largest floorstander can be assembled for a little over a grand...



Jamo's S 8 ATM Atmos module atop the S 807 floorstander



Fyne Audio enters the market with a premium F1-10 floorstander

JL AUDIO

If your AV hopes aren't constrained by budgetary concerns, the JL Audio Gotham v2 subwoofer might be right up your street. This leviathan uses twin 13.5in woofers, forward-firing in a vertical arrangement, and given some get-up-and-go by a 4,500W amplifier. The cabinet that holds it all together is a non-parallel-sided design that features 2in-thick glass fibre walls, meaning the whole sub weighs a hernia-inducing 163kg (the UK distributor admitted manoeuvring the Gotham to its 4th-floor demo room wasn't exactly an easy job). At the Sound & Vision show, this bass beast was asked to operate in a relatively small room, but had been set up well and turned in a superb performance with the car-chase and underground shootout sequences from *John Wick 2*. We'd love to hear this £16,000 flagship let off the leash, though.

KEF

With KEF's floorstanding speakers on demo with other brands at the show, the company chose to focus in its own room on its LS50 Wireless speakers, which now feature integrated app access to Spotify, Roon and Tidal. Show-goers may have been surprised to find these active standmounts having no issue filling the large space, with excellent imaging and bass nuance delivered by their 5.25in Uni-Q drivers, but the LS50s claim a potent dual-mono 230W amplification, and the performance is commensurate with the £2,000-per-pair price ticket. If you want them in KEF's 'Nocturne' special edition finish, however, you'll have to find an extra £300.

MISSION

Having achieved considerable praise in 2017 for its affordable LX speaker range, Mission has moved a little further upmarket with the new QX series. Across this lineup is a sophisticated cabinet design, which uses a slot port to reduce noise, plus arc-



John Wick 2 was given a helping hand by JL Audio's Gotham v2



shaped cabinet corners to smooth diffraction from the drivers, which are arranged in the classic Mission inverted fashion to improve time alignment. Cabinets are topped and tailed by smart-looking aluminium plates. There are multiple stereo options as well as centre, subwoofer and dedicated surround speakers. Prices start at £300 per pair for the QX1 standmount.

Mission, with its QX Series, joins the dipole surround speaker brigade

MONITOR AUDIO

It's been a busy period for Monitor Audio, meaning that the first public showing of its new Monitor series of speakers [see HCC #283] was joined by the unveiling of the company's Studio standmount. This takes the midrange and high-frequency drivers from Monitor Audio's premium PL500 II tower speaker and places them in a new cabinet, with a new crossover, for a stripped-down and highly focused £1,000 stereo speaker. There are three finishes available; the only other item in the range is a £350 stand.

NEAT ACOUSTICS

Having converted the IOTA standmount into an unlikely floorstander in the form of the IOTA Alpha we looked at last year, Neat has fed it some steroids and created the IOTA Xplorer. This takes the same form as the Alpha, but now uses an Air Motion Transformer tweeter and drivers from the more expensive Momentum range, including a pair of downward-firing woofers in an isobaric configuration. It still looks a little odd, but sounded excellent in a stereo demonstration, as anything retailing for around £3,500 (per pair) should.

OPTOMA

The only projector brand to demo at Sound & Vision was Optoma, and it came armed with its top-of-the-range laser-based UHZ65 (partnered with a 120in Grandview screen). When HCC dropped by, *Planet Earth II* was the 4K demo material of choice, the PJ making the most of its lush colour palette and beautiful cinematography. Any potential purchaser

put off by the projector's £5,000 ticket price could at least ask questions of the Optoma team about its new UHD40, an entry-level (£1,600) 4K DLP device using a traditional lamp light source.

REL

For a slightly different take on the usual bass demo, REL Acoustics set up a stereo pair of its elegant piano black £1,600 S/3 SHO subwoofers. Accompanied by 800 Series B&W speakers, and Rotel and Arcam electronics, the S/3s proved musical and subtle on hi-res recordings, but readily took on the heavy lifting when confronted with Blu-ray-delivered movie action and Rage Against The Machine's bombastic *Killing in the Name*. A repeated trick of the REL demo squad was to purposely switch off the pair during a runout, illustrating how the soundstage not only lost depth, but also spaciousness and scale.

SVS/EMOTIVA

Karma AV, the UK distributor of North American brands SVS and Emotiva, picked up the Best Home Cinema Room award from the Clarity Alliance. Making its UK debut at Sound & Vision was the SVS SB-4000 subwoofer (see page 54), in tandem with SVS Ultra speakers. Partnering electronics from Emotiva also caught the eye, with the brand's 11-channel XPA-11 power amp and RMC-1 processor in the rack. The latter in particular has a feature set that will intrigue high-end cinephiles – 16-channel processing of Dolby Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D, with Dirac EQ and a fully-balanced architecture, enabling 9.3.6 setups. That's probably more speakers than you'll ever own, but it makes for another option in a space where Arcam, Yamaha, Denon, Datasat and Trinnov are fighting for your cash.

Neat's Iota Alpha (left) and beefed up Iota Xplorer (right)



Optoma brought bigscreen projection to Sound & Vision with its UHZ65



Technics' SL-1000R: hi-fi for the high-earner...

TECHNICS

It was back to the future for Technics as it gave a UK demonstration of the SL-1000R turntable, a £14,000 behemoth that's an evolved version of the original SL-1000 from the 1970s. It packs a massive 7kg platter powered by a direct drive motor that reaches playing speed in a quarter of one rotation. It can be ordered with a Technics arm or you can select one yourself – and add another two if you are feeling indecisive.

XTZ

Swedish-born XTZ presented a THX Ultra Certified speaker package designed for those seeking home cinema indulgence first and a discreet install a distant second. The newly-launched Cinema Series M8 Towers (£2,440 per pair) and M8 Center (£1,060) presented an imposing LCR stage, dwarfing the nearby Samsung display, and Blu-ray demos of *Kong: Skull Island*'s opening sequence and later helicopter attack packed a mighty punch. S2 Atmosphere upfitters (£370 per pair) sat squarely atop the M8 Towers, rounding out ceiling-bound cues for maximum effect. Also on hand – and making their presence acutely felt – were two corner-located Sub 1X12s (12in, 500W), which sell for £725 each. A demo that dazzled with resolution and scale ■

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TV buyers can look forward to plenty of choice from Philips this year.

Steve May reports on the company's picture quality ambitions



PHILIPS PREPS OLED & NANO TECH FOR 2018 TV

PHILIPS IS ACTING like a TV brand reborn. It's walking with a swagger, and flashing smiles of pure Ambilight.

The brand has had a shaky couple of years and will readily admit that its UK market share fell to a point high on unmeasurable, but, boosted by OLED in 2017, it's now ready to challenge with three new OLED ranges, as well as a slew of impressive LED LCD TV models.

It's also quietly declared that it will throw its weight behind HDR10+, the rival dynamic metadata HDR format to Dolby Vision.

We took a closer look at its upcoming offerings at the brand's European trade show in Amsterdam, and quizzed Philips' TV guru Danny Tack about the company's next-generation plans.

OLED rising

Philips will launch five new OLED screens this year, and all promise HDR10+ support out of the box. Its incoming 973 and 873 OLED models will be available in both 55in and 65in screen sizes for the first time, while the entry-level 803 OLED will land at 55in. All are UHD Premium certified and boast 'HDR Perfect' performance, which sounds confident to say the least. Prices at the time of writing were unconfirmed.

Peak luminance at 900 nits, and a colour gamut that's 99 per cent of DCI-P3, should make for some



Completing the neat aesthetic of Philips' OLEDs is this slimline smart remote



A trio of drivers adorn the 803 TV

effective HDR. Three-sided Ambilight Spectra XL mood lighting comes as standard.

As we've grown to expect from the brand, all its models are well styled. The 9 Series is already a Red Dot design winner, thanks to its glass and aluminium aesthetics. An integrated six-channel soundbar distinguishes it from the step-down 873.

Naturally, the sets also boast the brand's high-spec P5 picture engine. First introduced on premium offerings in 2017, this processor will actually be included in no fewer than 23 models in 2018. Amongst other things, the P5 has been engineered from the ground up to improve the quality of streaming video services, reducing noise and banding by extending 8-bit video to 'near' 14-bit precision.

The brand's last OLED TV, the 9002, was hard to come by in 2017, as demand outstripped supply. 'We knew we had a hit with it,' UK MD Graham Speake told *HCC*. 'We just didn't know how big a hit.' The incoming 9 Series 65-incher is effectively the same model as the 9002, only larger.

There are interesting changes behind the scenes when it comes to the brand's new LED LCD models. Last year Philips had a brief flirtation with Quantum Dot panels, but for 2018 it's shifted to IPS NanoLED glass from LG Display.

Philips says NanoLED reaches the same level of colour gamut as QD, over 90 per cent of DCI,



but beats it for viewing angle, due to NanoLED technology featuring a layer of particles that better absorb excess light waves.

LCD screens may not be headline-grabbers in the days of OLED, but they still make up a bulk of TV sales. It's therefore no surprise to find Philips continuing to offer multiple ranges. Given that the company has been battling to find channels to distribute its screens, we'll be amazed if they all come to market. But this is what we know so far...

The incoming top-end 8503 Series will be available in 49in, 55in, and 65in models. These adopt a minimalist design with a smart aluminium finish, three-sided Ambilight and have a 'visible' sound system. Peak brightness from the edge LED array is said to be 400 nits. HDR ready, they'll be updated for HDR10+ compatibility via firmware.

A step-down 8303 line is headed by a 75in megascreen. Again, there will be 49in, 55in and 65in variants.

HDR10+ and HLG (Hybrid Log-Gamma) broadcast HDR will be supported on all models from the 8 Series up, basically all 100Hz panels. Philips LED TVs below the 8 Series use 50Hz panels, and don't support HDR10+. The 7803 range features a 75in range-topper, plus 49in, 55in and 65in models, and peak brightness is again quoted at 400 nits.

Rather confusingly, the 7303 Series (43in, 50in, 55in and 65in) uses a VA-type panel rather than an IPS NanoLED design, and incorporates a direct LED backlight, which should aid picture uniformity. This range isn't particularly punchy, however, claiming a peak 350-nit luminance. The sets feature a matte metal stand and three-sided Ambilight, and mark the jumping on point for the brand's P5 picture processor.

Finally, there's this year's 6503 Series, an entry-level into 4K HDR resolution that lacks any Ambilight frippery. These screens are a perennial value hit for Philips, and will come in 43in, 50in, 55in and 65in screen sizes. While they are HDR compatible, they're not inherently bright. But you can expect them to be priced to shift.

HDR for all

While Philips seems firmly committed to HDR10+, it doesn't rule out backing Dolby Vision at some point. 'The door is not completely closed,' we were told. 'If the market jumps on Dolby Vision we might have to follow. Currently we're not going to have Dolby Vision... but never say never.'

The appeal of HDR10+ dynamic metadata is obvious. It can be delivered via HEVC over IP or through HDMI. It works with both the next-generation HDMI 2.1 standard, and through HDMI v2.0, using an intermediate iteration. It's backwards compatible, and will give HDR10 static performance on non '+' sets. And it's royalty-free for hardware vendors and software companies alike.

Currently in Philips' (many) picture menus, the Perfect Contrast mode has four settings (Off, Min, Medium and Max levels). With HDR10+ comes a new Automatic option, for when streams have HDR10+ dynamic metadata.

For smart connectivity, Philips is sticking with the Google TV OS, and says its screens will soon be Google Assistant-ready.

The non-Android 6 Series screens use a new Saphi smart TV platform, which is far less ambitious, but still comes with all the required streaming services. A quick whizz through the user interface left us rather impressed.

Let's get neural

While the picture quality on Philips' upcoming 4K UHD TVs is undeniable, the brand topped its product unveils with a preview of a next-generation image processing solution. 'I've spent 25 years working in picture quality and to be honest this is the best thing I've ever seen,' enthused Danny Tack.

The demonstration was described as 'a work in progress' and looked stunning. Interestingly enough, Philips used its first-gen OLED panel for the demo. 'I think this proves that it's not the panel that's important, it's the image processing,' said Tack.

Footage of snow peaks bristled with detail and dynamics; colour depth was extraordinary. Most astonishing of all was the demonstration used standard dynamic range footage. The picture mode was Vivid, but it sure didn't look like you might imagine Vivid to look.

'There's nothing overdone here. Every detail, every wrinkle in the snow scene is there,' explained Tack.

Philips declined to reveal details ('It's a bit early to say how we do the processing') but confirmed it was running a double chip arrangement, essentially P5 silicon with additional hardware. 'We need to get this to a single chip. We are the best today, and with this work in progress I hope we'll stay the best,' proclaimed Tack.

'Call it AI, call it neural network processing... we'll reveal more at IFA in September.' ■

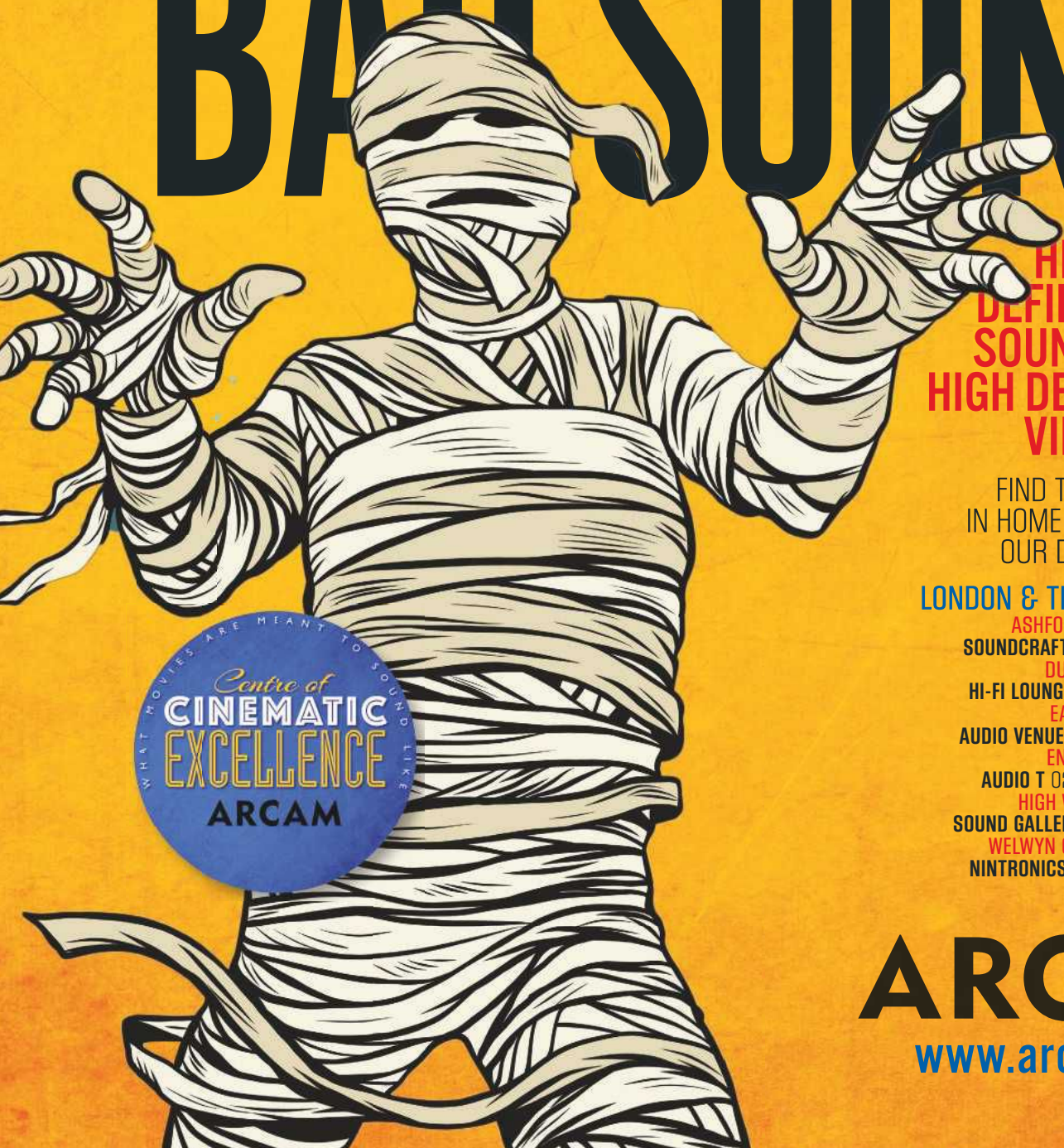


Danny Tack: 'It's not the panel that's important, it's the image processing'



The 973 OLED employs a six-driver soundbar

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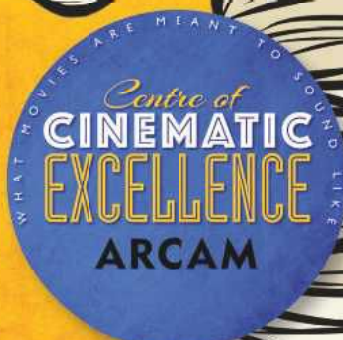
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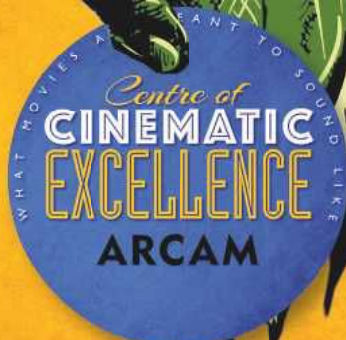
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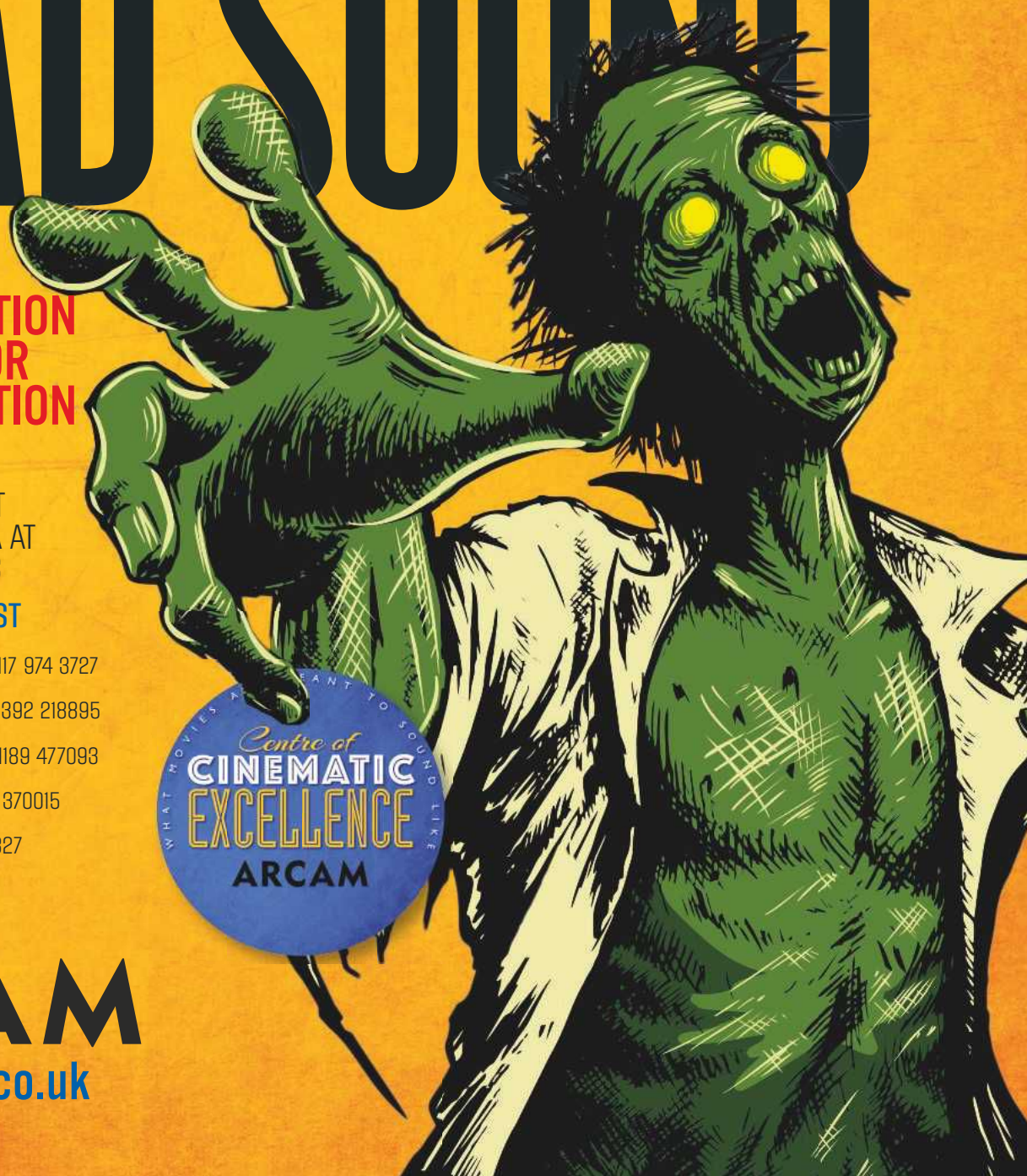
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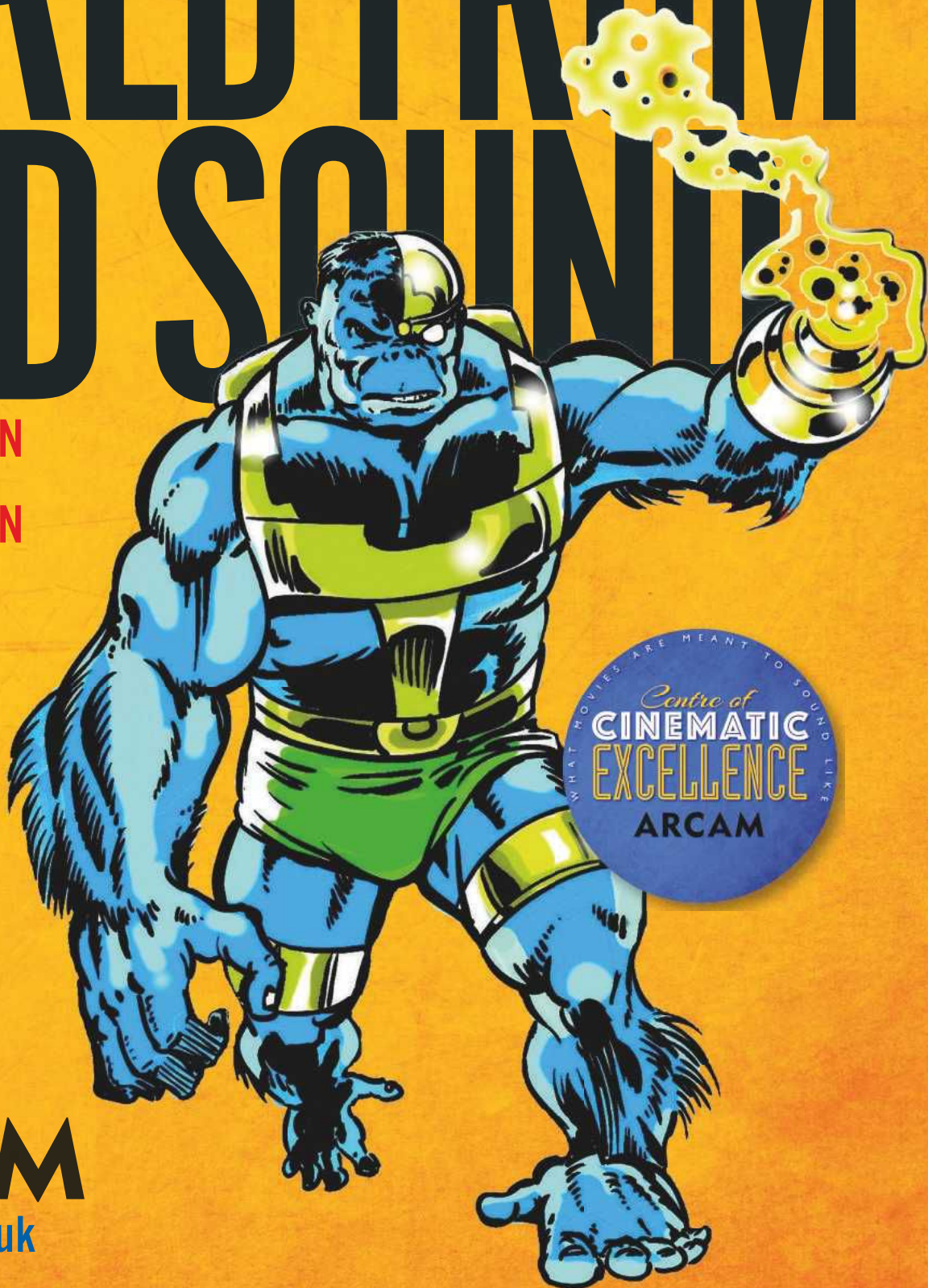
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TAKING MOVIES TO THE



Martin Dew quizzes IMAX CTO Brian Bonnick about the cinema corp's past, present and future

HAVING SPREAD ITS wings into home cinema and VR, and astonished moviegoers with last Summer's *Dunkirk*, IMAX is on a roll.

The largescreen cinema pioneer started life in the 1970s, utilising side-fed 70mm film, with 15 sprocket holes per frame (a format known as 15/70), to create a detail-rich and vision-filling 1.43:1 image. Since then it has become intertwined with Hollywood, and added a bespoke surround sound array, 3D presentation, digital cinema and a new laser-based projector system to its arsenal.

The slate of films featuring IMAX 'DNA' – either shot using IMAX cameras, formatted to suit, or given an IMAX-ready remaster – is growing, and in 2018, you can grab a seat at one of the company's 15/70-based theatres (such as the BFI IMAX), soak up its laser tech (at Cineworld Leicester Square or Cineworld Sheffield), or catch an IMAX Digital screening. But is the oldest and best-known premium cinema system damaging its brand through expansion into multiplexes, and is it up for the battle with object-based audio rivals? IMAX's Chief Technology Officer Brian Bonnick has the answers.



Bonnick has been the driving force behind IMAX's laser projection system



Obvious question: what's the difference between IMAX and a screen at my local multiplex?

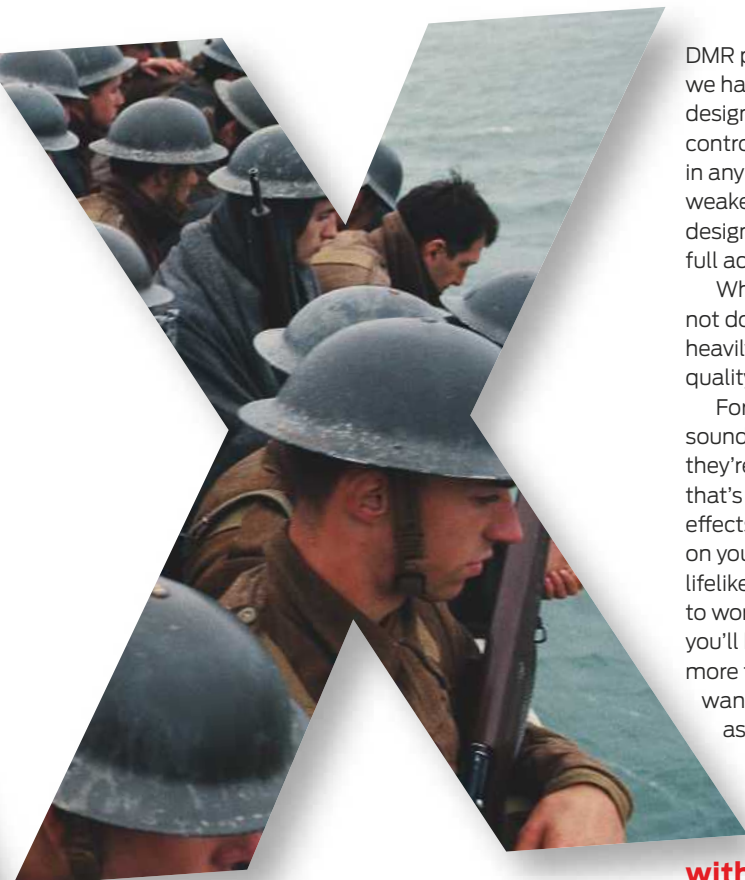
You just gave me an hour's worth of conversation!

There are five areas that differentiate the IMAX experience. The obvious ones are the projection systems, which are proprietary and custom-designed, and the sound systems, and I could talk for hours on those.

Next is the venue itself. IMAX is very much about putting you into an experience. We need to immerse you, and one of the ways we do that is through the geometry of the theatre. Every IMAX theatre is what we refer to as a short-throw venue. In other words, the audience is sitting relatively close to the screen. When we convert, for example, a normal theatre into IMAX, we go in, remove their screen, put a new screen in, wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling, and we bring it a lot closer to the audience.

If you took somebody sitting in the front seat, and they were looking at the original screen in that theatre, we are bound by the constraints of the walls and the ceiling of that theatre. While their screen doesn't usually go wall-to-wall, we can certainly do that, but that's still not giving us a broad enough field of view. By bringing the screen forward, it's the equivalent of putting in a new screen where their's was, that goes beyond the walls of their building.

Also, the theatre is acoustically treated to IMAX standards; specifications have to be adhered to. We want you to be able to go into any IMAX theatre, and



DMR process, again, with the filmmakers. And we have a sound system and projection system designed to work with these other elements. We're controlling the whole eco-system. And as you know, in any home theatre system, it's only as good as the weakest component. In our case, each component is designed knowing what's upstream of it, and taking full advantage of it.

When we're doing that workflow process, we're not doing it out-of-sight of the filmmaker. They are heavily involved. We don't want to degrade the quality of what they're trying to convey.

For example, with audio, you'll see a lot of soundtracks coming out in other venues where they're using multiple loudspeakers. You know, that's fine. They're just kind of cranking up the special effects, and that's fine once in a while, but it wanes on you. We're trying to provide an experience that's lifelike to the viewer, and that means that you have to work with the filmmaker, because sometimes you'll have someone who actually wants us to put more film grain in, and then you'll find another who wants grain removed, or wants it not quite as sharp as we can make it. There's not a right or a wrong.

It's a question of making sure that we're bringing the right tools to the table.

When a studio comes to you with a project and says they want to have some sequences in 1.43:1, jumping up from 2.39:1, they obviously make the decision during pre-production...

We have them coming to us well in advance saying they want to do a film, they want to do it in IMAX, and they want to do something different. As a result of *Dunkirk*, they've been approaching us and saying, 'I love what Nolan did.' We climb into bed with them, and we start to figure out creatively what it is they want to do. Some have particular shots they want to do that way, some have entire scenes, some have a hell of a lot of the movie they want to do. They usually want to take advantage of the IMAX aspect ratio, they want to take advantage of the sharpness of the projectors, and the higher resolution.

have the same experience. And to do that, we need to make them all sound the same.

Another part we deal with is at the front end. IMAX is 'cradle-to-grave,' and the cradle part is our filmmakers. We've worked with filmmakers for 40 years. Many of the top ones – I'm sure you're familiar with Chris Nolan, J. J. Abrams, Michael Bay, the Russell brothers... – they've all embraced IMAX. In combination with their skillsets, and the use of IMAX technologies such as our large-format cameras, they are able to capture content in a way that you normally can't in any other venue.

We're able to support a 1.43:1 aspect ratio. If you compare that to the home, 1.85:1, 2.20:1, etc, it makes it much more immersive. Our filmmakers may choose to show the majority of their film with that larger aspect ratio, or they may choose to use it to reflect an emotion.

The other area that we have is our digital remastering technology. This is the method by which we can take content and completely remove the grain, and create a clean slate if we wish, or something in between. We're able to remove artefacts in an image, and improve the sharpness and the overall quality, the desaturation. We're able to take a piece of content that looks very grainy and clean it up. It's a day-and-night type thing.

Is this what IMAX calls 'DMR'?

That's correct. We're controlling the cameras at the front end with the filmmakers, we're controlling the

Dunkirk's BD release retains the aspect ratio switching of the film's IMAX print



Dunkirk is director Christopher Nolan's fourth film to use IMAX cameras



Eye-openers

A handful of BDs make the most of their IMAX origins...

Tron: Legacy



This sci-fi sequel featured around 40 minutes vertically enhanced for IMAX 3D – and this shape-shifting remains intact on both 2D and 3D Blu-rays.

Captain America: Civil War 3D



Only the 3D BD release of this Marvel title offers you the chance to view it with its set-piece airport fight sequence in the larger 1.85:1 aspect ratio. Other flicks from the Marvel stable – *Doctor Strange*, *Guardians of the Galaxy* (and its sequel) – also go large on 3D BD.

Transformers: The Last Knight

The fifth *Transformers* flick keeps its aspect ratio switching on 2D and 3D releases. *Age of Extinction* only switched on the 3D disc, and before that, *Revenge of the Fallen* showcased its IMAX history on a US 'IMAX Edition' exclusive to Walmart.

Dunkirk

So much of this 2017 drama was lensed on IMAX cameras that the 'switch' here is reverting to the wider 2.40:1 ratio (for scenes on the boat *Moonstone*). See also Chris Nolan's *Interstellar*, *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* for more IMAX BD thrills.

Star Trek Into Darkness 4K



This second helping of the *Star Trek* reboot debuted in IMAX 3D ahead of regular theatres, but it wasn't until its Ultra HD Blu-ray release that home cinema fans got to see Kirk's heroics alternate between CinemaScope and 1.78:1.

The Hunger Games: Catching Fire



IMAX cameras were used to film the arena battle sequences in this 2013 actioner – the film kicks into 1.78:1 here on its BD release.



Avengers: Infinity War is the first film to be shot entirely on IMAX digital cameras

Are there base criteria for screen size and number of seats in an IMAX cinema? There are IMAX screens in UK cinemas that are smaller than the BFI iteration...

There's a bit of a misnomer that if the screen's not big, it's not IMAX. I acknowledge that when you walk into a theatre and the screen is eight stories tall, your body relative to the venue makes it feel bigger. But, visually, when the lights go off, and you're watching that movie, it doesn't matter whether the screen is 40ft wide or 80ft wide. It has the same field of view.

We work hard at trying to get into the largest auditorium within a multiplex. At some of those venues, if the design precludes us from going in, then we have to make do with what's available. We work with the exhibitor to select sites that have good demographics to support it from a business level, but also try to optimise size, acoustics and all the geometric things that are of concern to us. You're correct, in some cases it's not an 80ft screen, because they just can't support it. [But] we can put a screen in, and maintain that accentuated aspect ratio, so when the lights go off, you're still getting that wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling experience.

The same optimised viewing angle too?

Yes. There are venues we turn down all the time where we don't believe we can achieve that. As an engineer, it's less to me about the screen size, although we're not going to go into a 30ft screen. There are more technical parameters that we know, from experience, that when you get less than a field of view of 'x', you've started to detract from what can be perceived as IMAX.

IMAX began with 15/70mm theatres. Will any more of these be built? Or is what we've got as many as we'll get?

What we've got now is certainly as much as we'll get. We've got some that have been mothballed and

we're seeing what we can do about bringing them back into the marketplace. To be blunt, we're not quite sure right now, because we haven't been through the assessment. But we won't be manufacturing more, because [it's] a legacy design. It's 40 years old. We can refurbish ones we've already got, but we couldn't build from scratch. I just don't think economically that anybody could do that.

IMAX laser has a 1.43:1 aspect ratio too. Is it a replacement of 15/70 in terms of screen resolution and performance?

I actually like the laser better. I still like the film, in that it provides a film look. When we designed our laser system, we did so with the mindset of trying to approximate the visual experience that you get with film, as opposed to a video look that you can get with a lot of other systems. There are subtleties in our laser system that, even down to some of the types of glass we've used in the optics, reflect what a film-based system provides. Obviously, we don't get the artefacts and dust onscreen.

I think where films stand out is where they have been captured at 18,000 [horizontal] resolution. Our film system is capable of displaying that where obviously our digital projectors are capable of 4K. We use dual projectors, and we're employing a technology that allows us to increase the perceived resolution because we've got double the number of pixels. It's not quite 8K, but when you look at the technology we're employing, it's a lot more than 4K. So, both have their advantages, and both can work side-by-side very well. Going forward, I think our GT laser, the one that does 1.43:1, is a lot more capable of filling that gap.

Does showing a regular 2K or 4K film in an IMAX screen damage the brand?

If they're showing a film that is not issued by IMAX, a standard goes up on screen to say that you are not watching an IMAX movie. There aren't a lot of movies



Black Panther's IMAX DMR iteration incorporates aspect ratio switching



Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom will screen in IMAX 3D

that get shown that way. We have a pretty heavy slate of films now. I think we're putting out a movie roughly once every week and a half on average. Last year we did about 60 films.

Not every film gets processed the same way. They're dependent on how the filmmaker and their team made it. Some are almost engineers themselves – they understand how to capture content technically, and they create a near-pristine piece of quality content right out of the box. Others do not. So, the way we apply our technologies is very specific to every film. We don't have a cookie-cutter process. Every film IMAX looks at, in conjunction with the filmmaker, we determine 'What does this film need?', recognising number one that we've got a projection and sound system that exceeds anything else out there.

For example, just about every filmmaker, when their soundtrack comes through, can have it remastered. Our system can go an entire octave lower than anybody else's. That octave gets you into that phase where, for example, in *Dunkirk*, when those fighter planes were shooting and flying, your body is almost palpitating. It's the difference of being at a rock concert where you can feel your chest beating, versus hearing that rock concert with a nice sound system. It sounds nice, but it's not the same.

We can take the same content someone else has got and it's going to look better on our system because we know how to manage convergence, brightness, and pixel alignment. These are all subtle, technical things, but when they start to go awry, the quality on the screen is not as good.

Is IMAX audio using six channels? There was talk of a 9.1-channel system. Where are you with that?

We have a 12-channel system now. It's not to compete with other people who are offering 60 channels and so on. It really has merit in our largest venues. What we've done is we've added two additional speakers on the side walls, and four additional loudspeakers in the ceiling.

The Dark Knight, in 2008, marked the Hollywood feature film debut of 15/70mm IMAX cameras



In a lot of these systems with multiple loudspeakers, there are a couple of issues. They do a very good job of giving a point source, or sound coming from multiple locations in the theatre. The drawback is that you can't spend a ton of money on those loudspeakers, because you've got anywhere from 20 to 60 of them in there. So you tend to get poor-performing loudspeakers. Yes, you can put a sound from a certain point, but the sheer cadence and the quality of that sound, the realistic aspects of it, just aren't going to be there.

The other problem is they make one soundtrack and they're relying on a computer to remix it, based on the number of speakers in that theatre. So, if I have an object-oriented sound system that has 20 loudspeakers versus 60, the processor in the theatre has to figure out how to restructure that sound. It does a pretty good job, but it's different. I think it's a good system, and I think it's an ideal system for a home-type environment. That's, I think, why it's there. But we've taken a different approach – which we were doing 40 years ago – in that we've got discrete channels, and a discrete subwoofer, which are all full-range. We're able to provide you with an extreme, high dynamic range audio soundtrack, way beyond that of anybody else. We jokingly say that you can literally hear a pin drop in the theatre, and you can hear a rocket ship taking off at 118dB or 120dB without distortion.

Everyone's talking about object-oriented sound and all these special effects. That's fine for a special effects movie where the sounds are not real. You can't do them wrong because there's no reference to base them on. But when, for example, you're showing a film like *Dunkirk*, our human brains know what a plane should sound like, we know what a bomb going off should sound like, and we have a perception of what the reality of that sound is. In order to reproduce that, every loudspeaker has got to be tuned the same as the next.

Everyone else is using tuning systems that will have, say, 31 bands of tuning, plus some parametric bands too, but that's fundamentally it. In our system, we employ computer algorithms, and we use a physical tuner, so we don't just rely on the computer. We rely on human ears, the old-fashioned way. But we take thousands and thousands of readings from all of these loudspeakers from 20 different spots within the theatre. The computer system stores all this information, and we can make adjustments any time we want.

And you go loud too...

These are loudspeakers that are designed for an IMAX short-throw venue, and where we want to provide you with the loudest sound when it happens. We generally don't play it super-loud. Our amplifiers have well over 25,000W of power. At any point in time, typically, our amplifiers are running at 100W-200W. The point is, I've got so much darned headroom on those amplifiers, that when that airplane starts shooting or that bomb blows up, I don't have any distortion to worry about. And these are all factors that contribute to creating that feeling of realism of sound, and that's important.

'aving it large

IMAX isn't your only bigscreen option



When you step out of your home cinema to take in a blockbuster at the multiplex, you're not short of 'premium' options in the UK – strengthened by 3D, 4K digital projection and Dolby Atmos audio, cinema chains have upped their game technology wise.

All the major players (ODEON, Cineworld, Vue, Showcase) have IMAX screens, yet all also have their own branded 'experiences', offering large screens, 3D sound and 4K visuals – Cineworld Superscreen, ODEON ISENSE, Showcase XPlus and VueXtreme. Finding exact screen specifications isn't easy, so if you want to know whether your local chain's own-brand screen offers a more immersive viewing experience than your nearby IMAX, give them a ring first.

There's also Dolby Cinema, which combines Atmos audio and Dolby Vision HDR digital projection. There's a huge buzz around this, but in the UK it's still just a buzz; there are no Dolby Cinemas here. There are four in The Netherlands and three in France, though. Maybe plan yourself a holiday...



The company's dual-projection laser system debuted in 2015

How often are your projection and sound systems calibrated?

It's great when a tuner comes in and tunes your theatre today, and for the next two weeks it all looks great. But what happens down the road? Obviously, we can't keep an engineer on site, so we have microphones located around the theatre, and every morning they listen to some specific sounds, and they compare them to a reference design, and they're capable of making adjustments, should there be a variation in sound.

Loudspeakers are like car tyres. They do vary, with temperature and humidity, so we're able to ensure that the sound is tuned perfectly every single morning. Similarly, we use a camera that looks at the screen every single morning. I can't tell you all of the things it does because it's proprietary, but one of the things it checks is brightness. If we're using a dual projector system, it makes sure that both projectors are putting out a) the proper light level and b) that they're within a minute tolerance of each other. Because in 3D, in a dual configuration, if your light levels are off a little bit, your brain picks up on things, and funny things start to happen.

We're now at a point where 94 per cent of all field issues are resolved remotely, where many years ago, you'd have to send people out. We do send techs out twice a year, and they do maintenance, like changing filters. They will do a validation. And if it's something we can't adjust remotely, they will go in at that point.

Your partner is Barco with its stacked projectors in your digital IMAX screens, but are you using Barco technologies for the IMAX laser system?

No. Barco is absolutely a partner of ours, designing the light source that feeds our GT laser, and it designs it to our specification. Everything else in the system I'm designing.

Every projector in the world has typically – if it's not a colour wheel – three chips mounted onto a prism. Light bounces into that prism, goes through a red, green and blue filter to each of these three chips. The chips are all aligned on this prism, so if I turn pixel 'number one' on, they all direct pixel 'one' out of the lens, and they have to be superimposed on each other – that's what the prism does. That works great.

The problem is that it was never designed to handle really and truly the power level that lasers put out. You have stray light... there is this piece of glass, and the chips all start to expand and contract. On your screen, you now get pixel misalignment; you get convergence issues where you might see a fine magenta or green line, depending on the leading or lagging edge.

Stray light is bouncing around, grossly affecting contrast. Also, because you've got so much glass, it affects sharpness, so you've got three Achilles' Heel problems. With our laser, we spent over \$60m developing a solution. We threw away the prism, we have these chips mounted about a foot apart from each other, so there's no stray light, and our contrast levels more than double IMAX film. Even in our lenses, we've removed glass, and we get this unbelievably sharp image. And then our projectors are an ecological system; they have humidification and temperature management systems within the projector to maintain a constant level.

Now we have an environment where I have no stray light, chips mounted far apart, no glass, so my sharpness is better, and I'm maintaining a thermal equilibrium environment. I don't have pixel drift and I don't have convergence issues.

Does IMAX have a mission statement?

I can tell you what mine is! It fundamentally boils down to us being all about providing the world's most immersive experience for consumers, that lets them go somewhere that under normal circumstances they would never be able to go and experience. I guess it's a bit like calling it a VR experience, in a sense. Our intention is to remain at the top of the food chain.

Lastly, how do you watch movies at home? Presumably you're into home cinema as well...

Yes. But how do I watch them? Not as well as when in the theatre! I have a home-built projector, being an engineer, and a 16ft-wide screen, and I sit very close to it as if it was IMAX. I'm very much into the audio and the visual, and home automation, and all that stuff. I think it probably just goes with the territory ■

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Bringing IMAX home

If the first IMAX 'private theatre' installation in Europe looks like it cost a million pounds, that's because it did

DUG OUT OF a basement in a London property, the first domestic IMAX cinema in Europe is certainly one of installer Cornflake's most prestigious projects. Built around the cinema company's Theatre Palais specification (there's an even more premium flavour for larger setups), it uses its custom projection and surround sound speaker/amp technologies to provide a state-of-the-art movie-watching experience.

'A private IMAX is the pinnacle home entertainment system,' says Cornflake

designer Mark Withers. 'We expect it will prove highly popular...'

The setup incorporates a dual 4K projector array, with plenty of adult- and child-sized passive 3D glasses on tap for stereoscopic sessions. A media server and Blu-ray player are among the sources, while touchscreen control is handled by proprietary IMAX hardware. As with the company's cinemas, the system is automatically calibrated daily.

Fancy a room like this? You'll need £1,000,000... ■

The owner's request for three rows of seating meant the existing basement floor had to be lowered by a metre



KIT CHECKLIST

PROJECTOR: IMAX custom dual 4K projection system (1.26-2.73:1 throw ratio, passive 3D, DCI-P3 colour gamut)

SCREEN: 1.89:1, curved, 240in

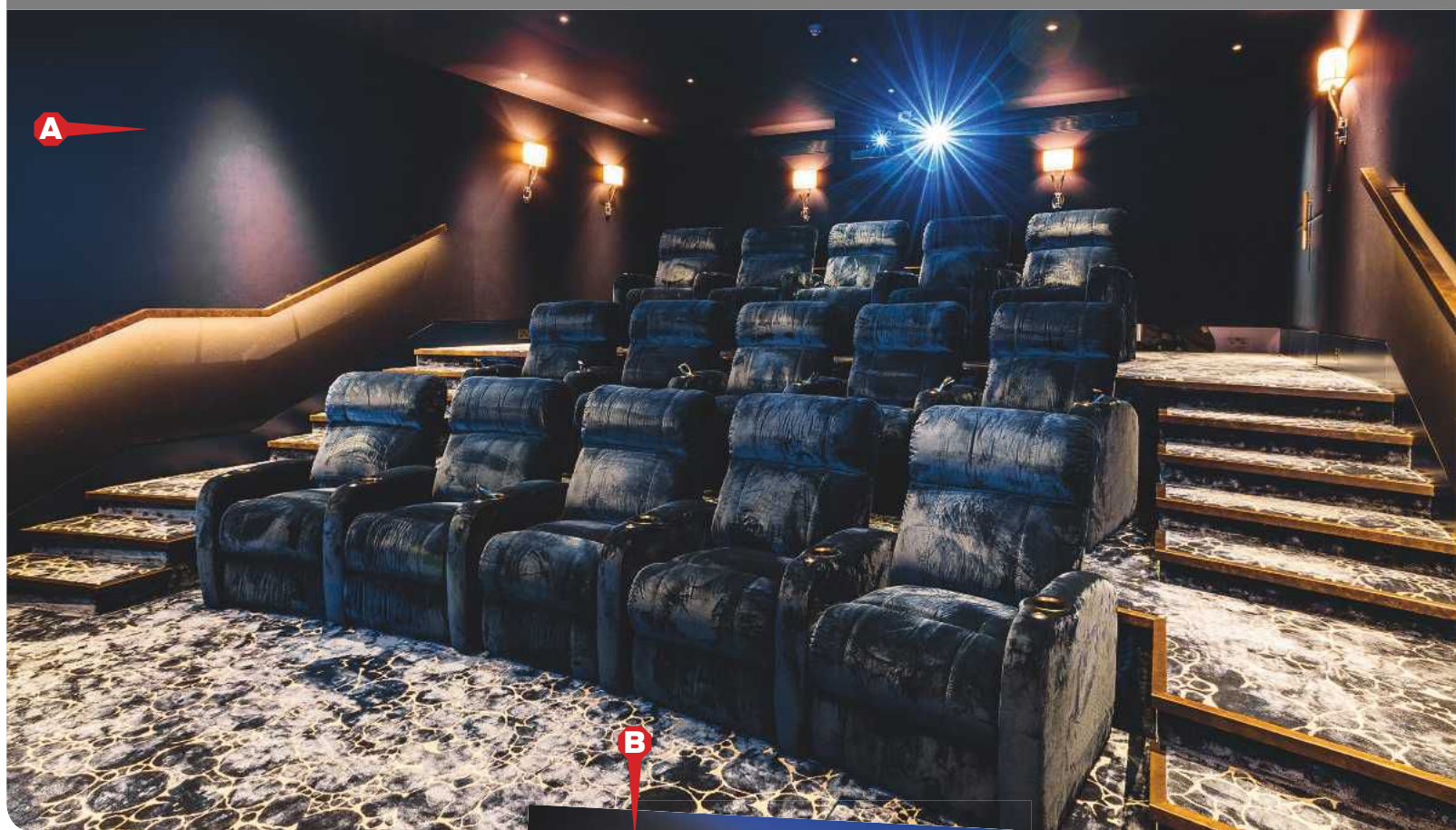
LOUDSPEAKERS: Proprietary IMAX sound system (7.2)

POWER/PROCESSING: 360W per channel (into 8 ohms) amplification; processor with Dolby Atmos/DTS:X support

SYSTEM CONTROL: IMAX Private Theatre proprietary control with touchscreen interface

SOURCES: Blu-ray player; IMAX media server

SEATING: 15 x IMAX Private Theatre recliners over three tiers



A. Size is everything

The spec for IMAX's Palais system requires a ceiling height between 2.4m and 3.8m, a screen size of 165in to 240in, and room dimensions of 80m² to 150m². A 'Prestige' specification is designed for smaller spaces

B. To the power of two

As with an IMAX commercial cinema, dual 4K projection (via bespoke Sony models) is used to craft a premium bigscreen image

C. Feeling blue

Cornflake wrapped the cinema walls in a stretched fabric dyed specifically to meet the owner's colour scheme preference. All fifteen seats are a colour match too

D. Behind the scenes

The LCR speakers are mounted behind the screen, which measures 5.5m and runs from floor to ceiling



E. Luxury touches

One reason that the installation cost for this setup hit the £1m mark is the opulent finish demanded. 'You obviously do not have to spend a million to create a good-quality home cinema,' says Cornflake's Mark Withers

F. Box clever

Lurking in this property's rack room is an IMAX movie server, which the brand claims offers the best content format in the market – 'even better than 4K UHD Blu-ray quality'







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Sub/sat stealth bomber

Q Acoustics revisits its 7000i speaker package and introduces a new subwoofer in pursuit of living room integration. We put this compact 5.1 bundle through its paces on p46



HCC RATINGS KEY...

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Denon AVC-X8500H;
Pioneer SC-LX901

This AVR therefore has a serious specification and feature roster, up there with the best at the cutting-edge of home cinema. What happened to the reserved Marantz AVRs of old that would plough their own furrow, often a little behind the tech curve?

The answer to that question is most likely Sound United. Or rather the acquisition of Denon and Marantz by this audio umbrella group that also owns the likes of Polk Audio, Definitive Technology and Boston Acoustics. I'd wager that Sound United was determined to make its first new flagship Marantz product stand out. And it has.

Dressed to impress

Cosmetically the look remains the same. Viewed from the front the SR8012 is all but indistinguishable from my own two-year-old AV8802A processor. The central porthole display, with its fancy blue LED ring light, shows basic text over two short lines. The usual raft of buttons and inputs, and a more comprehensive display, are hidden behind the pull-down flap below. Our black sample looked suitably moody on the shelf. A gold-tinted silver version pulls off a considerably more luxurious, high-end appearance.

The rear panel is no less eye-watering. The gold-plated terminals, copper-plated chassis screws and 11-strong set of high-quality speaker terminals exude purposeful class. The remote is a little less impressive but probably only because we have seen this metal-edged design for several years. You can also operate the receiver via the sophisticated smart device Marantz app.

The HDMI roster is 8-in/3-out, all 4K/HDCP 2.2 compliant, and the 'Monitor1' output is Audio Return Channel (ARC) enabled. An imminent firmware update

1. Marantz's remote still incorporates a tiny LCD display

2. With its flap closed, the SR8012 offers a stylishly clean fascia







The HDMI stage is joined by a suite of analogue and digital audio inputs, plus video fallbacks. This includes 7.1-channel phono input, pre-outs for all 11.2-processed channels and two further stereo zones. For those who are back into a vinyl music groove, there's an MM phono stage.

Network connectivity is Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and wired Ethernet, opening up a raft of streaming possibilities. As mentioned, the AVR is HEOS multiroom enabled, allowing your home cinema to become a premium zone for your streamed music system. It also supports AirPlay, Spotify, Deezer and Tidal, and integrates TuneIn 'net radio.

As we found with the also 11-channel Denon AVR-X6400H [reviewed in *HCC* #280], you do really need to

The SR8012 has Audyssey MultEQ XT32 on board, and is also capable of being configured with the £20 Audyssey Editor app. You can check out our review of this in *HCC* #283, but, to summarise, it is for itinerant tweekers and not essential for getting a good setup.

Once you've been through the Audyssey routine it is well worth diving into the menus to see what has been enabled by default. For my setup, Dynamic EQ, Dynamic Volume and LFC containment are not required, and I was surprised to find loudness management set to on as standard, as that automatically enables dynamic compression and dialogue normalisation.

Even without the Audyssey Editor app you get the opportunity to fettle channel EQ with a 9-band graphic equaliser. Well, sort of. The channel options for the equaliser are limited to left, right, left+right or all channels. If you want to tame the high-frequency impact of just your dialogue speaker for example, you are out of luck. Well, out of pocket by twenty quid for the Audyssey Editor App anyway.

Smooth criminal

As Marantz's first 11-channel AVR, and packed to bursting with tech and features, does the SR8012's sound match this maelstrom of AVR posturing? Thankfully, no. What we have here is a receiver built around Marantz's much-loved smooth, detailed and sophisticated sound.

Paddington 2 on Blu-ray might not be one of my regular movie test discs, but as the first instalment was so good and the sequel has a Dolby Atmos track, I had to give it a go. Neither the Marantz nor the film disappoint even if Atmos overhead effects are few and far between. The chirpy soundtrack is infectious, the dialogue characterful and the slap-stick delivered with great comedy timing. *Paddington*'s short tenure in a barbershop is a festival of sound effects sent to every corner of the room and through this AVR each effect has real pop and sparkle.

Perhaps more impressive is the detail in the dialogue. Ben Whishaw (the voice of *Paddington*), Julie Walters, Ben Miller and Hugh Bonneville all have distinctive voices that the SR8012 crafts accurately and projects with vigour. There's a good balance of depth and clarity through the centre channel and characters never feel trapped inside the speaker. Along with subtler ambient information from the surround and Atmos channels, the SR8012 goes a long way towards creating a wide, three-dimensional soundstage with believable presence.

Thumps, crashes and thuds have plenty of punch but not quite the seismic scale of the burliest receivers. With Audyssey XT32 EQ set to 'Reference' I found the overall balance aired on the lighter side of my more robust LF preferences. Adding a couple of dB to the subwoofer trims instantly added richness to the lower registers and gave the sound more body. I did try the graphic equaliser set to 'all channels' and rolled in a lower-mid bass boost. After some fettling I had managed to make an entire dog's dinner of the sound. Leave that off then.

With content that naturally has more guts, the Marantz quickly gets into an all-action stride. The vanilla Dolby Digital 5.1 mix on the DVD pressing of *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* impressed on every level. Okay, maybe not a height level, but the SR8012 did an outstanding job of conveying the epic ambience of the soundtrack and delivering sword clashes and big explosions with a real dynamic edge. There was no bass overhang on effects like huge doors slamming, or bass

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY ATMOS: Yes **DTS:X:** Yes (plus DTS Virtual:X via later firmware) **THX:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** Yes. 7.1-channel **MULTICHANNEL PRE-OUT:** Yes. 11.2 phono **MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 11 x 140W (into 8 ohms) **MULTIROOM:** Yes. Zone 2 **AV INPUTS:** 4 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial) **HDMI:** Yes. 8 x inputs; 3 x outputs **COMPONENT VIDEO:** Yes. 3 x inputs; 1 x output **VIDEO UPSCALING:** Yes. To 4K. **DIMENSIONS:** 440(w) x 460(d) x 185(h)mm **WEIGHT:** 17.4kg

FEATURES: Wi-Fi; Bluetooth; Ethernet; USB input; hi-res audio support includes 192kHz/24-bit FLAC, WAV and ALAC, and DSD 5.6MHz; Audyssey MultEQ XT32; optional Audyssey Editor app; ISF video calibration; Marantz Remote app; Amazon Alexa Control (future firmware); eARC (future firmware); HEOS compatible; Apple AirPlay; Spotify; Deezer; Tidal; TuneIn 'net radio; Auro-3D; MM phono input

PARTNER WITH



B&W 700 SERIES: A rung below the brand's 800 Series, this loudspeaker range packs floorstanding, standmount and centre channel models with a premium ethos. Assemble a 7.1 flatbed for the SR8012, and add heights from B&W's CCM range.

bloom on deeper voices. You simply get finely presented and neatly executed effects. The Marantz certainly doesn't set out to turn your stomach inside out with visceral bass impact, but the LFE and Sub gain controls are there if you want it to.

Those who double up their system for audiophile music listening certainly won't be disappointed with the SR8012. That polished, detailed sound shines through in two-channel, particularly using the Pure Direct mode. Sticking with retro media, the Marantz lets the supremely well-recorded CD of Kate Bush's *Hounds of Love* breathe effortlessly into the room, its stereo mix given a huge soundstage. Via the receiver's built-in phono stage, a romp through the remastered Led Zeppelin boxset *Mother'ship* delivered an evening of air guitars and wailing as the SR8012 brought the near 50-year-old rock 'n' roll to life.

Blurred lines

Denon's latest AVRs have been getting a whole lot less aggressive sounding than their fast and loose forebears, while Marantz is now adding all the top tech and toys to its sophisticated audio charms. Lines between these two sibling brands seem to be blurring.

I've enjoyed the SR8012 a lot. It's a cracking all-round AVR, mixing a superb lineup of features with a polished, articulate and believable sound, and I found it has (most of) the extra oomph over the previously reviewed nine-channel SR7012 that I was hankering for. It still won't make a sit-com Toyota Aygo journey sound like a scene from *Bullitt*, but does engage the listener at every turn, its full 11-channel amplification building on Marantz's signature audiophile quality sound. That it has feature updates coming later this year only adds to its appeal ■

3. A third HDMI output allows for 4K video in a second zone

4. Marantz's AVR is designed for 7.1.4 setups via its claimed 11 x 140W amp stage

4



HCC VERDICT



Marantz SR8012

→ £2,700 → www.marantz.co.uk

WE SAY: A sophisticated sounding, supremely well-equipped 11-channel AV receiver that will wow all but the hardest of hardcore action fans.

Q Acoustics has tweaked its 7000 Series, adding its slimmest subwoofer yet. **Ed Selley** weighs it up

Cinema on a diet



Having arrived in the affordable speaker market and issued a swift kicking to the established order, things have calmed down a little at Q Acoustics. Its ranges of speakers are now seeing upgrades rather than wholesale changes – a reflection that they ain't broke and don't really need fixing.

The latest member of the family to receive some attention is the curvaceous 7000i Series, here released in a new bundle referred to as the 'Slim.'

The satellite speakers, also used in Q Acoustics' 7000i Plus and 7000i packages, have been slim from the outset and remain so here. They all have an identical driver complement, with an unusual configuration for a speaker of this type. It's a 2.5-way design, with two 3in midbass units with Neodymium magnets sited on either side of a ring radiator tweeter (something of a Q Acoustics speciality) in a woofer/tweeter/woofer arrangement that allows the enclosure to be relatively slender.

At the same time, the use of two midbass drivers rather than one gives each satellite a radiating area that is fairly large and ensures that the claimed roll off

of 95Hz seems entirely achievable. The only difference between the 'LR' satellite and the 'Ci' centre is that the orientation and mounting point for the foot are changed.

These satellites are joined by the all-new 7060S (where the S, you've guessed it, stands for 'Slim') subwoofer. In a world of fancy

bass boxes, this is charmingly prosaic. It's a sealed design with a forward-firing (although depending on how you place it, sideward-firing might be more applicable) 8in driver, powered by a 150W Class D amplifier. Controls are basic (crossover, phase, level and an auto on/off function), connections are limited to stereo/LFE phono input, and there's no remote control. But it claims a respectable 35Hz-200Hz frequency range, which is the important part.

For those with long memories who remember when we've looked at previous iterations of the 7000 Series, the subwoofer's specification is extremely similar to the older models. The difference is that the 7060S is only 150mm deep (six inches in old money) and is wonderfully compact for a sub of any description. Faced with competition from soundbars and soundbase systems, Q Acoustics has worked hard to make the 7000i Slim as easy to smuggle into a living room as possible.

The 7000i satellites are well placed to assist in this aim. The integral foot fitted to each of them can be rotated to become a wall mount (for which an easy to follow mounting template is supplied). This lets the speakers be fitted equally happily on a horizontal or vertical surface. A ball joint allows the speaker to be correctly aligned, too, although this is quite easily knocked – during my audition, at least one of them at any given time had taken on a slightly quizzical appearance. Additional pairs of the speakers are available (for a 7.1 setup) at a curiously specific £268.99.

The 7060S can also be purchased on its own (should you fancy doubling up or using it with an existing speaker package) for £329.

Colour options are either the black wrap of our review sample or a white finish. The speakers look cute, and their metal housings feel solid and inert. A rubber gasket on the bottom of the foot, which stops it marking what you place it on and ensures a good fit against a wall, is a nice touch too.

The terminals are also quite clever, albeit a bit fiddly. They are spring-loaded posts that grip the cable under tension. They don't work with 4mm plugs, but it's unlikely that buyers of a system such as this have got that far down the road of AV tinkering.

The 7060S also feels well assembled, although some of the details aren't quite as convincing. There's a removable side panel to cover its inputs, but even using the supplied mains lead and a slimline subwoofer cable, I couldn't get it to sit flush when cables were attached.

Seamless integration

This £1,000 array has one immediately noticeable positive attribute that it shares with the brand's other subwoofer variants: with the 7060S sat at the front of the room, practically underneath the centre speaker (with a 100Hz crossover in play), the handover between sub and satellites is deliciously seamless. It's a neat trick, >

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Compact 5.1 speaker system

POSITION:
Q Acoustics' premium sub/sat package

PEERS:
Elipson Planet M; Cambridge Audio Minx



1. The 7000i Slim packs Q Acoustics' trimmest sub yet

showing some efficient system matching from the Q Acoustics design team.

Just as pleasing is the cohesive soundfield crafted by those five identical satellite speakers. There's a slickness to pans across the LCR soundstage even when the speakers themselves are placed fairly wide apart, while front to back effects transitions are extremely believable.

On top of this the 7000i has consistently good tonality and detail. The pared-back but immersive DTS-HD MA 5.1 Blu-ray soundtrack for 2016 journalist drama *Christine* (not the killer car flick) is handled beautifully. The newsroom location is conveyed as a vibrant and realistic space, serving to augment the viewing experience without

'With music, this has the kind of performance that gets your foot-tapping and embracing the content'

distracting from the dialogue and drama onscreen. Having sub/sat systems sound big when there is plenty of bombastic action isn't that tricky. What the 7000i does well is to sound big and convincing with simpler and smaller-scale material too.

Admittedly, there are limits to this system's potential, and how much this matters will depend on your viewing preferences. The demo-tastic catacomb sequence in *John Wick 2* (Blu-ray), with its thrillingly dynamic and fast-hitting gunfire, shows that while the 7060S subwoofer is controlled and well integrated, it just doesn't deliver the levels of slam that more potent and more traditionally designed models can offer. It lacks out and out aggression, which is something you can still get from woofers around the £300 mark. Does your Blu-ray library mainly feature the films of Vin Diesel? If so, this might not be the system for you, especially as the satellites also value civility and control over absolute dynamics – although this does mean that they don't make a hash of less perfectly recorded material.

Also, I don't think this is accidental. Every time I found myself wanting a bit more fury from the Q Acoustics

SPECIFICATIONS

7000LR

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 3in 'Long Throw' midbass drivers; 1 x 1in Ring Radiator tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 95Hz-20kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 85dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 100W **DIMENSIONS:** 100(w) x 240(h) x 160(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 1.6kg

7000Ci

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 3in 'Long Throw' midbass drivers; 1 x 1in Ring Radiator tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 95Hz-20kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 85dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 100W **DIMENSIONS:** 207(w) x 115(h) x 160(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 1.6kg

7060S (subwoofer)

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 8in woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 35Hz-200Hz **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 150W Class D amp **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 480(w) x 324(h) x 150(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 11kg
FEATURE: Stereo phono/LFE input; 0-180 phase switch; auto standby

PARTNER WITH



QED PERFORMANCE MICRO: Continue the discreet theme by wiring the 7000i satellites with QED's Performance Micro, a slim loudspeaker cable designed to tuck under carpets or behind skirting boards. Price is around £4.50 per metre unterminated.

system, I was soon revelling in just how well it gets on with everything else. As an array mainly designed for living room setups, it's likely to see daily use. Useful, then, that broadcast TV is unfailingly a crisp, clean, and well-balanced listen. It's particularly strong at generating a decently immersive experience from a stereo feed, with dialogue from the centre channel clear and tonally accurate.

Looking back at a previous review of a 7000i package [see HCC #232], it's clear that much hasn't changed about Q Acoustics' top-flight sub/sat range. As before, I'm struck by how effective this is used in 2.1-channel guise. Listening to the newly released *Lies Are More Flexible* by Icelandic electronic duo GusGus (Qobuz, CD-quality FLAC) proves immersive and genuinely musical in a way that many 2.1 systems struggle to match. It's the kind of performance that gets your foot-tapping and embracing the content, rather than worrying if levels are set correctly.

Sweet-sounding

This all-round competence is something that Q Acoustics has a well-earned reputation for – the brand's own soundbars and soundbases are similarly on the money. Anyone looking to equip a lounge with a blink-and-you'll-miss-it speaker array, but with their sights on something a little upmarket, should investigate the sweet-sounding 7000i Slim – not least because the 7060S woofer is fantastically svelte. Those with more space, and an urge for more dynamic attack, may want to look at Q Acoustics' Plus variant, and larger-scale sub/sat bundles ■

2. The 'foot' on each speaker doubles as a rotational wall-mount

2



HCC VERDICT



Q Acoustics 7000i 5.1 Slim

→ £1,000 → www.qacoustics.co.uk

WE SAY: The 7000i Slim is very easy to live with, flexible, and an assured all-rounder. Some owners might want more excitement and bass brutality.

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AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Mid-range 4K HDR PJ using Sony's SXRD technology

POSITION:

Above entry-level 260ES and below laser-based 760ES

PEERS:

Sony VPL-VW260ES; JVC DLA-X7900

1. The remote offers instant access to nine preset picture modes

2. The PJ's front-facing fans allow for rear-wall placement

Sony's latest projector is a native 4K HDR beast, reckons **John Archer**

Hail the hi-res hero!

Sony's current 4K PJ range has tried harder than any before to offer something for everyone. The recently reviewed £5,200 VW260ES brought Sony's native 4K SXRD projection system to a more affordable price point. The £15,000 VW760ES added laser illumination to target the brightness and colour needed for a true high dynamic range picture performance. The £20,000 VZ1000ES makes premium projection a 'lifestyle' proposition.

It turns out, though, that the sweet spot of Sony's varied projector offering is the £7,000 VPL-VW360ES under scrutiny here. Draw up a 'price' and 'performance' Venn diagram for 4K projection, and you'll find the words 'Sony VPL-VW360ES' sitting in the middle.

'I... am your father'

The unit looks and behaves a lot like its more affordable stablemate. Its 'squashed Darth Vader helmet' shape is essentially identical to the VW260ES [see HCC #280], and while its gritty finish and golden lens detailing add a degree of opulence, it doesn't shout 'luxury' as loudly as, say, SIM2's Nero 4 UHD.

The connections, again, are nothing special. There are two 12V triggers, but only two HDMI inputs, when we're starting to see much cheaper 4K models offer three. And the HDMI's here share the same bandwidth limitations of Sony's step-down model, meaning that 50p or 60p 4K signals can't be delivered with full 4:4:4 chroma sub-sampling (4:2:0 is used instead).

Setup is the same slick procedure as before. The 2.06x zoom, focus and (vertical and horizontal) image shift options are all motorised and thus controllable via the remote control. They offer plenty of adjustment flexibility, making it easy to adapt the picture size and position to your room.

So what does the £1,800 price bump over the entry-level VW260ES get you? Most importantly, Sony adds a dynamic iris system (Advanced Iris3) capable of adjusting the light output for each image frame, resulting in a claimed contrast ratio of 200,000:1. Sony tellingly refuses to give a contrast figure for the VW260ES.

The other key difference is that the VW360ES supports lens memory, so you can save different zoom and focus settings for different movie aspect ratios.

The same 1,500 Lumens of light output is claimed here. Yet experience suggests the dynamic iris system could make a huge difference to how the PJ performs.

Automatic for the people

The VW360ES automatically detects whether it's receiving HDR content (both HDR10 or HLG are supported) and adjusts its settings accordingly. In particular, it sets its lamp output to maximum, ramping up brightness. And while you don't have to stick with the default HDR (or SDR) settings, for the most part they're pretty effective.

My advice is to plump for the Cinema Film 1 preset and default Cinema Black Pro settings, not to bother with Motionflow motion processing, and push up the Contrast (HDR) setting to around 80.

The higher you set the Contrast setting with HDR, the more it raises the image's brightness floor. This reduces the light range of HDR pictures, but makes them a whole lot more consistently watchable. Actually, 'watchable' is an understatement. The VW360ES's handling of the 4K Blu-ray of *Thor: Ragnarok* is stunning.

The sharpness of the image hit me like a Hulk hammer blow. As with the VW260ES, the benefits of Sony's native 4K optics are beautifully apparent. Shots such as those amid the rubbish mounds of Sakaar, or close-ups of Thor, Loki and Hela's costumes, are deliciously detailed.

There's also that gorgeous sense of image 'density' that only 4K can deliver, making the image look so immediate you feel you could step right







3

inside it and start wielding your own Godly powers. Even the best pseudo 4K solutions can't match the VW360ES for sheer 4K purity and refinement.

It does no harm to the image's sharpness that this projector handles motion so cleanly. With the 24p frame rate deployed by *Thor: Ragnarok* and most other movies it's superior to the majority of projector rivals, and with 50/60p content (one reason to own *Billy Lynn's Long Half-time Walk* on 4K Blu-ray) it steps up its cohesive, blur-free appeal.

As for the introduction of that dynamic iris, it works to give this PJ a tangible HDR performance boost over the already decent VW260ES. During the sequence in *Thor: Ragnarok* where Hela takes on the Valkyrie against

'The VW360ES gives you the best 4K and HDR performance currently available below £10,000'

a mostly dark but brightly highlighted sky, the range between the picture's brightest and blackest parts is extreme yet satisfying, giving the image a beautiful, almost painterly quality.

And this projector's improved light control means that it's less prone than the VW260ES to leaving dark portions within mainly bright shots appearing devoid of detail.

Admittedly, as with all of Sony's recent HDR projectors, the VW360ES's most 'balanced' brightness with HDR content is achieved by raising the contrast setting to essentially reduce the picture's dynamic range, as described earlier. I have to stick up for this workaround, as it gives a 1,500 Lumens projector – which lacks the native luminance to cope with the full range of a typical HDR image – the potential to do its best with such content. With this easily tweaked compromise, Sony is just making HDR look better for its consumer base, helped by an efficient dynamic iris that rarely belies its presence with noticeable shifts in black levels and brightness, even with aggressive HDR sources.

Disco inferno

The VW360ES delivers a surprisingly good sense of the wide colour spectrum (liberally) available on the *Thor: Ragnarok* 4K platter. The punchy tones of Grandmaster's disco-themed outfit, and surrounding environments on Sakaar, look far more vivid and 'alive' than they do on the standard dynamic range Blu-ray. The brightest and most

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter (glasses optional) **4K:** Yes. 4,096 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HLG **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs; 2 x 12V trigger; RS-232 port; Ethernet; IR input **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 1,500 ANSI Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 200,000:1 **ZOOM:** 2.06x **DIMENSIONS:** 495.6(w) x 195.3(h) x 463.6(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 14kg

FEATURES: SXRD native 4K projector; motorised horizontal (+/-31%) and vertical (+85%/-80%) lens shift; 6,000-hour claimed lamp life in Low mode; up to 300in image; 26dB fan noise; Reality Creation and Motionflow processing; Triluminos colour; lens memory function; Advanced Iris3 dynamic iris; HDCP 2.2 on both HDMI inputs; 1.38-2.83:1 throw ratio

PARTNER WITH



SONY TDG-BT500A: Sony's active shutter 3D specx are available for around £50 a pair. Lightweight and designed to be worn over existing glasses if needed, they run off a replaceable Lithium-ion 'button cell' battery.

colourful sequences, such as the Sakaar street party, aren't as exuberantly intense as they appear on premium flatscreen TVs, however.

And for a bit more perspective, the VW360ES's 4K HDR visuals are no match for those delivered by the laser-based VW760ES [see HCC #283]. Brightness, colour intensity and contrast are all dialled down. Yet the difference isn't as extreme as the £8,000 price gap between the two might lead you to expect.

The projector supports 3D (something current single-chip 4K DLP models are ignoring) using the active shutter system. Glasses are 'optional' though, and – as usual – we were not supplied any for testing.

With the relatively untaxing demands of standard dynamic range pictures, the VW360ES unsurprisingly continues its good work. There's a pleasing nuance and balance to its colour handling, leaving no tones feeling overcooked, while blacks are natural and full of subtle shadow detail. Sharpness remains bountiful with native 4K sources, and even with 1080p material the projected image appears brilliantly crisp and detailed thanks to the impressive upscaling of Sony's proprietary Reality Creation processing. You shouldn't buy this PJ just to screen 1080p BDs, but such discs won't be done a disservice.

Best in class

Adding to the VW360ES's picture quality heroics are a lack of such common projector issues as 'rainbowing' interference, colour striping and excessive running noise. The form factor is manageable, there's a white finish available if you fancy, and ease-of-use is good. The result is a model that not only gives you the best picture-quality-per-pound in Sony's current range, but also the best 4K and HDR performance currently available below £10,000. Very highly rated, even with its HDMI bandwidth shortfall ■

3. IR, RS-232 and 12V trigger ports enable integration with automated systems

HCC VERDICT

★★★★★

Sony VPL-VW360ES

→ £7,000 → www.sony.co.uk

WE SAY: More great work from Sony. Effective HDR performance and pin-sharp visuals make this the best 4K projector we've seen at the price point.

"stunningly good"
-avforums.com



"A superior-sounding, movie mad speaker system
offering serious value for money"
-Home Cinema Choice



"AMAZING"
-Trustedreviews.com



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Bass to believe in

SVS's heavy-duty SB-4000 subwoofer partners a large driver and 1,200W amp with intelligent operation. **Ed Selley** tries his hardest to ruffle its feathers

THE MARKET FOR heroically powerful subwoofers seems to have legs at the moment, and new arrivals are turning up all the time. So if you've been a long-standing producer of big, potent subwoofers like American brand SVS, it's time to up your game a little.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Active subwoofer
with 13.5in driver

POSITION:
Sealed version of
new 4000 Series,
below 16-Ultas

PEERS:
GoldenEar
SuperSub XXL;
B&W DB3D

This explains the brand's new 4000 Series, a replacement for its long-running '13' models. As before, it's available in sealed, ported and cylinder forms and the SB-4000 tested here – the sealed version – is once again the smallest member of the family. Not that it's actually 'small' by any stretch of the imagination.

One thing that remains unchanged from the preceding model is the driver size. This is still 13.5in, with a twin-magnet

assembly that weighs nearly 20 kilograms on its own. It uses an edge-wound voice coil to better apply power to its stiff, lightweight composite cone, with a heavy-duty injection-moulded gasket, and long-throw surround, aiming to keep it healthy and maximise excursion.

As with previous SVS subs, power comes courtesy of a Sledge amplifier (1,200W) – a combination of Class D amplifier with a discrete output stage in a manner more reminiscent of a traditional Class A/B design.

Where the SB-4000 is significantly different than its predecessor is with its control interface, which is more closely related to the SB16-Ultra and PB16-Ultra models released last year [see HCC #270]. So gone is the selection of knobs and dials on the rear panel, replaced by a menu-driven control system that sets crossover, phase (which can be set in one degree increments for proper control freakery) and DSP settings. To further help with this, the leading edge of the subwoofer's front panel now includes a display to give you feedback on



the setting engaged at the time, and a remote control is also supplied – although it's rather small and potentially easily lost.

The user experience is then boosted by a Bluetooth-based control app (iOS, Android) that allows you to tinker with the settings of the SB-4000 from your listening position rather than peering over the back of it. I found the iOS version of the app to be more stable, and it connected instantly. The Android iteration, however, proved a little less willing to get going.

'This sub delivers almost the textbook definition of great home cinema bass – deep, clean and fast'

The sub itself is very recognisably an SVS. The chassis is MDF, and some parts of it are two inches thick. This means that the SB-4000 weighs 46kg unboxed – thankfully a huge amount of effort has gone into the packaging, allowing you to unpack it without herniating yourself.

Build quality is superb, and the sub looks rather fetching, even if the metal grille is a little on the industrial side. The price of our black-gloss sample (£1,800) is £50 more than a less natty black ash option. A sealed design means placement is easy enough, although this isn't a bass bin that vanishes into most rooms.

Cruising for a bruising

The standard acid test of subwoofery, those sensational opening notes of *Edge of Tomorrow* (Blu-ray), are delivered by the SB-4000 as genuinely subsonic, and its room-loading capabilities prove outstanding. Moving onto the initial beach landing sequence, the experience is every bit as visceral as you might expect from a 13.5in, 1,200W woofer, with bass effects being delivered with the same effortlessly clean and deep force that was present from the movie's beginning.

What becomes apparent quickly is that the SB-4000 is not simply in the business of rattling internal organs. The power available is harnessed in such a way as to be almost delicate at times. The shootout sequence with the undercover cops in getaway-driver caper *Baby Driver* (Blu-ray) never loses the musicality built into the scene, while still serving up gunfire that you can feel as well as

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 13.5in forward-firing composite cone woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 19Hz-310Hz (+/-3dB) **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 1,200W (4,000W peak) from Sledge amplifier **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 453(w) x 465(h) x 471.3(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 46.4kg

FEATURES: Stereo line-level input; stereo line-level output; LFE input; stereo XLR input; stereo XLR output; 12V trigger; variable phase control; Analog Devices DSP; front-panel display; compatible with SVS Bluetooth app (with parametric EQ, room gain compensation, etc)

PARTNER WITH



BABY DRIVER: Image quality may be a little sub-par, but the DTS-HD 5.1 track accompanying this nifty thriller is a treat, with a music-infused soundtrack that puts your subwoofer through its paces. The 4K release gets an Atmos version.

hear. SVS's driver starts and stops with impressive speed for something as large as it is.

Pretty much regardless of what you choose to play on it, the SB-4000 is almost impossible to unsettle. The extremely potent rumble of the kill droid rolling around in *The Incredibles* (Blu-ray) is absolutely superb. The sound here is more about being felt rather than heard, but there are the fine details of its movement to pick out.

Even used with comparatively tiny satellite speakers and a high crossover, bass integration is excellent, although I did find I got better results using a line-level input from my Yamaha AVR (bypassing its onboard processing), than via the LFE feed.

My only real criticism of the way the SB-4000 behaves is a slightly odd one. This is a superbly controlled subwoofer, aided by some clever DSP, but there are times when I'd love to be able to make it a little more boisterous. Compared to the GoldenEar SuperSub XXL [see *HCC* #274], which can be persuaded into great hulking slabs of unnecessary low-end if you ask it nicely, the SVS stays absolutely controlled. I'd almost like there to be a 'Ludicrous' setting in the SVS Bluetooth app (to join the Music and Movie presets), which I could select when I wanted to behave like a five-year-old.

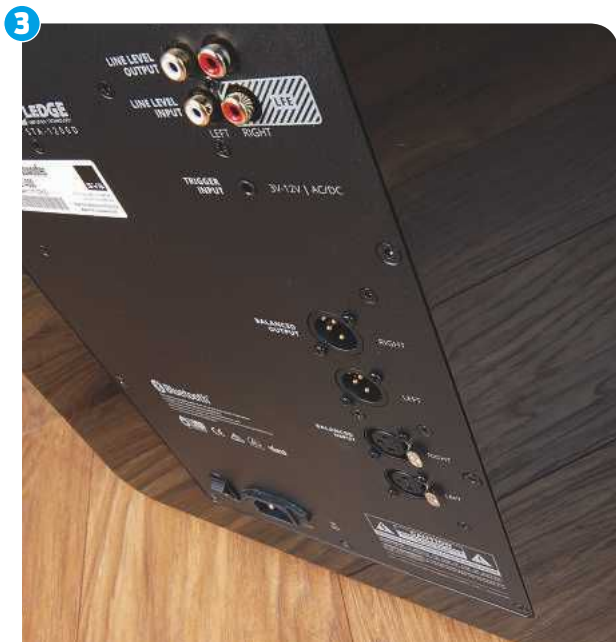
Essential audition

Criticising a piece of peerless engineering for being a bit too well engineered is somewhat irrational, though. What the SB-4000 delivers is almost the textbook definition of great home cinema bass; deep, clean and fast, and easily integrated with your chosen speaker system. It isn't cheap and requires a fair amount of space, and you might expect an app-controllable device at this price to come with an automated room calibration routine, but the SB-4000 remains a truly excellent subwoofer. If you're shopping around this price point, it needs to be on your shortlist ■

1. To protect the driver, you can fit a supplied steel mesh grille

2. The remote has keys for volume and preset EQ, plus access to setup features in conjunction with the front panel display

3. Owners of high-end processors can use the sub's XLR input



HCC VERDICT



SVS SB-4000

→ £1,800 → www.svssound.com / www.karma-av.co.uk

WE SAY: We might want it to be a bit rowdier at times but the SB-4000 is a peerless bass generator and hugely accomplished. Plenty of setup/tweaking flexibility too.



With no lamp to replace, longevity is just one attraction of this compact UHD projector, enthuses **Steve May**

Acer lasers in on 4K home theatre

'Progress always comes late'. Projectionist Alfredo said that of non-combustible film in *Cinema Paradiso*, but he might well have been talking about 4K home cinema projection. The technology has reluctantly, and expensively, trailed UHD flatscreens. But thanks to a new generation of DLP models, it has finally put on a welcome spurt.

New 4K projectors are landing with almost monthly regularity. And they're becoming increasingly more affordable. Acer's VL7860, featured here, is the most wallet-friendly Ultra HD laser projector yet. At £3,500, it brings the benefits of solid-state projection tantalisingly within reach for many home cinema enthusiasts – we've seen laser projectors before, but at prices ranging from £5,000 for Optoma's UHZ65 to £15,000 for Sony's VPL-VW760ES. So it this Acer the new poster boy for 4K home cinema?



The PJ's feet can also be adjusted to raise its image height. A grid test pattern within the onscreen menus is provided to check focus and linearity.

Connections comprise two HDMI, but only Input 2 is HDMI v2.0/4K capable, which means you'll want to run all your sources through your AVR. There's also a PC VGA

'Acer always brings a lifestyle aesthetic to its consumer projectors, and this model is no different'

D-Sub in/out, powered USB port for HDMI streaming dongles, plus RS-232, 12V trigger and Ethernet. A minijack audio output is available if the onboard sound system (5W, stereo, best described as 'functional') doesn't rock your world.

Quieten down please

The VL7860 isn't crying out for extensive fiddling straight from the box. Acer offers a wide range of viewing modes, most of which work well. But running noise can be an issue – in full flight, the projector hits 30dB, which is quite loud. Opting for Eco reduces fan noise to 26dB. A Silent setting gets you to 24dB.

Consequently, while a Movie preset offers the most pleasing visual balance, the Silent mode was the one I most often returned to, purely because it was the most social. Screen brightness falls accordingly, but in a fully dark theatre room this isn't an issue. Of course, if you can isolate the VL7860, its operating noise will be of less concern.

Among the usual picture adjustments is Super Resolution. Switched on, the projector gets an obvious boost to fine detail. Within a test environment, this results in a slight patterning artefact. However, subjectively, it brings a modicum more crispness to real world images.

The Acer is bright, but not a light cannon. While it can be used in rooms with some ambient light, it tends to look better in dark conditions. Standard brightness is rated at an impressive 3,000 Lumens, dropping to 2,400 Lumens in Eco mode.

The projector delivers 2160p projected resolution using Texas Instruments' XPR (eXpanded Pixel Resolution) technology. This allows an 8m pixel image to be projected, even though the DMD inside has only 4.15 million mirrors. These switch imperceptibly to increase pixel density.

For what it's worth, I would argue that this is a genuine 4K projector, unlike pixel-shifting models from Epson and JVC, but it's not directly comparable to Sony's SXRD native UHD fleet.

Under the microscope, test material displays requisite detail. There's information here that simply isn't visible on a projector using 1080p panels and pixel-shifting techniques.

When it comes to HDR, what we have here is a broad brush approach, adjusting brighter scenes for a high APL (Average Picture Level), or emphasising shadow detail. The upshot is a wide, dynamic presentation. There are variable levels of HDR adjustment offered, although if you



1. The PJ offers vertical (but not horizontal) lens shift

2. Acer's remote is backlit and packs buttons for HDR and Sharpness tweaks

Long live the laser!

One of the key benefits of laser light over a standard lamp is durability. For the VL7860, Acer predicts 20,000 hours use in standard mode, rising to 30,000 hours if run in Eco. You might well think that before 30,000 hours of movie viewing you'd have upgraded to a new-fangled (8K?) projector, but it's reassuring nevertheless.

This unit is described as the world's smallest 4K UHD laser projector, and at this point in time, it probably is. But it's still big enough to warrant a permanent installation.

It looks the part, too. I'm a big fan of Acer's industrial design; the brand always brings a lifestyle aesthetic to its consumer projectors, and this model is no different. The gloss-white and silver-grey casing screams contemporary techno-chic. The lens is offset, with on-body controls positioned behind the lens assembly; cool running vents run either side. The matching remote control is backlit a bright blue.

Setup is manual, rather than motorised, but straightforward. A 1.6x zoom and 1.39-2.22:1 throw ratio (equating to around 100in from 3.5m) should suit most small/mid-sized rooms. A pop-up lens-shift dial allows you to lift the picture upwards of 15 per cent if required.

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Single-chip 4K DLP projector with HDR and laser light source

POSITION: Acer's flagship home cinema projector

PEERS: Optoma UHZ65; Vivitek HK2288



edge beyond '2' on the sliding scale you'll blow out highlight detail. I found the most effective contrast and colour balance was with HDR on setting '1'. And for the cleanest fine detail, devoid of obvious edge enhancement, I'd suggest keeping the PJ's Sharpness setting on a tight leash, no more than '1' on the sliding scale.

Overall contrast is good, although don't expect OLED-style blacks, nor the performance of the pricier Optoma UHZ65. With letterboxed movies, black bars are still projected dark grey. Acer's contrast claim is 1,500,000:1 with Dynamic Black image management (in which lamp power is adjusted dynamically to optimise black levels).

As this is a single-chip DLP projector, I was aware of fleeting rainbow fringing, although this was less of an issue

'There was so much detail in the futuristic cityscapes of *Ghost in the Shell* I wanted to freeze the image and explore'

watching movies, and more evident when navigating menus. As always, you should get a demo before investing to see if it bothers you.

The VL7860 isn't a wide colour projector. It boasts REC.2020 colour compatibility, but that simply means that any wide colour gamut source is downconverted to REC.709. That's not to imply any massive shortfall in vibrancy, as richly saturated visuals still have sufficient pop.

Motion is also handled fairly well. There's a proprietary AcuMotion tech that interpolates frames to reduce blur, for smoother imagery, but it should be said that this doesn't actually increase subjective motion detail.

Away from HDR, this projector can still strut its stuff. I played the Scarlett Johansson cyborg actioner *Ghost in the Shell* (Sky UHD). With its neon cityscape and cybernetic

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI (one v2.0 with HDCP 2.2 support); PC VGA D-Sub; minijack audio input; minijack audio output; 12V trigger; RS-232; powered USB output **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 3,000 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 1,500,000:1 **ZOOM:** 1.6x **DIMENSIONS:** 457(w) x 157(h) x 289(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 8kg

FEATURES: DLP XPR UHD projection; 2 x 5W built-in audio; lamp life rated at 20,000 hours (Standard)/30,000 (Eco); 30dB fan noise; Movie, Dark Cinema, Game, Sports, Silent, User, REC.709, SRGB, Standard and Bright picture presets; ISF calibration; 1.39-2.22:1 throw ratio; AcuMotion motion processing technology; manual zoom/focus/vertical image shift control; Crestron eControl

PARTNER WITH



GOOGLE CHROMECAST: You can make use of the Acer's non-4K HDMI input (and USB power port) with this bargain Wi-Fi streaming dongle (£30), which acts as a player for a selection of compatible video apps on your smart device/Chrome browser.

SFX, the image is a visual feast. As the robot geishas attack, and Johansson breaks through the glass in slow-motion, the detail in the Acer's image is startling. There's a real sense of depth as you look deep into the frame (the movie did have a 3D theatrical release, which goes some way to explain the composition). There's no shortage of dynamic contrast from this 4K SDR source either. In fact, there's so much detail in the futuristic environments, I wanted to freeze the image and explore.

Compact and cool

The Acer VL7860 is part of the new wave of DLP projection that's able to push onscreen detail way past what we've seen with HD models. It's compact and cool, and that low-maintenance laser light engine promises a lifetime of consistent colour. It also makes life difficult for its main UHD laser rival, Optoma's UHZ65. It can't match that model for contrast or HDR brightness, but as it's around £1,500 cheaper some might think that's a worthwhile sacrifice ■

HCC VERDICT



Acer VL7860

→ £3,500 → www.acer.co.uk

WE SAY: This compact 4K laser projector delivers ultra-sharp images with vibrant colours. It's a tad noisy, and lacks some setup frills, but is still a solid performer for the price.

3. Source selection and menu controls are found on the PJ's top

4. Plenty of connectivity, but only one HDMI input supports 4K sources





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Compact Sony 4K spinner has Vision

As Sony prepares to rollout Dolby Vision on its 4K TV range, it's released a disc player to match. But does the pared-down spec of the UBP-X700 limit its allure? [Mark Craven](#) reports

WITH THE UBP-X700, Sony has added a new player to its Ultra HD Blu-ray stable that promises some improved functionality over its predecessors, yet cuts other corners to hit a new, mass market price point.

It looks very much like a step-down deck. Front on, it's visibly smaller and less domineering than its premium brethren, and the front panel is nondescript. A Sony badge sits on the left-hand edge, a USB input on the right, with acres of black plastic between. There's no display window, just a green power light, and what at first look like soft touch keys for power and eject turn out to be large panels that need to be physically prodded to operate. It's not especially stylish, and it doesn't have that same weight and assurance of build as the UBP-X800. The half-size remote isn't a design classic either, but is nicely responsive.

The back view is equally uninteresting. There are dual HDMI outputs (one audio-only), plus Ethernet and coaxial digital audio sockets (I'd prefer optical), and nothing else.

The absence of analogue audio outputs hints at this player's target audience – film and TV fans after a 4K fix. At the same time, however, the UBP-X700 retains support for Super Audio CD. DVD-Audio, surprisingly added to Sony's player lineup last year, has been left out. Will you miss it, though?

The deck offers wide multimedia support, both over a network and USB. It's ready and willing to playout your hi-res music sources, be they FLAC, WAV or DSD. Yet it doesn't get Sony's Hi-Res Audio certification. Such a badge isn't given based on format support alone; other

aspects, such as player construction and components, come into play.

Globe-trotting home cinema

The UBP-X700 can be bought for around £270. Our sample, however, has been supplied by UK specialist The Perfect Signal (TPS), and is modded for multi-region BD and DVD playback. In this guise, it sells for £400.

Although all Ultra HD Blu-rays are region-free (as per the BDA specification), the case for having a multi-region deck in your AV rack has only gotten stronger after the last couple of years. Most obviously, there are still countless desirable US releases on Blu-ray (and DVD) that you might fancy spinning, especially from boutique labels such as The Criterion Collection, Shout! Factory and Twilight Time.

More recently, AV hedz have turned to the US for Ultra HD imports, making use of the format's region-free nature, earlier release dates and (in some instances) superior packages. But a UHD purchase can come bundled with a Region A-locked 1080p BD housing all the extra features... The solution? Consider a multi-region deck.

Switching Blu-ray zones here is achieved simply through the remote control, using the red, green and blue keys to choose from Region A, B or C (the old days of secret key codes is a thing of the past). Multi-region DVD playback is automatic.

The headline feature of the UBP-X700 is its support for Dolby Vision, the next-gen HDR format supported by some 4K Blu-rays (including ones from Sony Pictures).

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Ultra HD Blu-ray
player with future
Dolby Vision support

POSITION:
Sony's entry-level
UHD player

PEERS:
Panasonic
DMP-UB320;
LG UP970



SPECIFICATIONS

ULTRA HD: Yes **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; Dolby Vision (future firmware) **UPSCALING:** Yes. To 4K **MULTI-REGION:** No. Region B BD/R2 DVD (but aftermarket multi-region mod available) **HDMI:** 1 x AV output; 1 x audio-only output **COMPONENT:** No **MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE:** No **DIGITAL AUDIO:** Yes. Coaxial output **ETHERNET:** Yes **BUILT IN WI-FI:** Yes **SACD/DVD-A:** Yes/No **DIMENSIONS:** 320(w) x 45(h) x 217(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 1.4kg

FEATURES: Front-mounted USB port; apps including Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube, iPlayer, Demand 5, Spotify; USB and networked file playback; disc tray child lock; screen mirroring; 3D BD playback

PARTNER WITH



DADDY'S HOME 2: While this Will Ferrell/Mark Wahlberg comedy sequel raises a smile, it really impresses on 4K Blu-ray with its picture presentation. A great demo disc for when you tire of VFX-heavy fare. Full review on p100.

The UBP-X700 isn't due its Dolby Vision firmware update until 'Summer 2018,' however, so it's a feature you'll have to wait for. That may be fine if you're not yet a DV TV owner, but is an annoyance otherwise.

This player is currently Sony's only model targeted with a Dolby Vision revamp – the UBP-X800 and UBP-X1000ES appear unlikely to be overhauled. As for the rival HDR10+ format (supported by Fox and Warner Bros), Sony hasn't committed to anything.

This marks the UBP-X700 out as a player that some will feel is already hamstrung, as Panasonic is promising machines that will spin both formats. But in the mess that is HDR, any buyer wanting to be able to playback both is,

'The UBP-X700 puts in an assured shift with 4K platters, delivering colour vibrancy and rich definition'

at present, looking at owning two displays. And, with all systems covered by the industry standard HDR10 iteration anyway, it's hard to get a handle on how this format 'war' will play out.

All that can really be said is, if you own or are planning to buy an HDR10+ capable 4K TV (from Samsung, Panasonic or Philips), then this deck might not be the one for you.

Getting to work

While it waits for its DV firmware, the UBP-X700 puts in an assured shift with 4K (HDR10) platters. The excellent image on Paramount's *Daddy's Home 2* (see page 100) carries gorgeous colour vibrancy, rich definition and expansive luminance. When Brad (Will Ferrell) gets his Christmas lights in a tangle with a snow blower (Chapter 5),

this player sniffs out the twinkling highlights. The interiors of the log cabin, meanwhile, are sumptuously detailed.

1080p BDs, upscaled to 4K by the UBP-X700, show no sign of extraneous noise or suspicious image fettling. 1980 slasher *Friday 13th* (BD) seems as grubby as ever, but not unwatchably so; modern Western *Slow West*, with its weirdo aspect ratio, looks clean and solid.

The deck is well-behaved, too. Loading speeds are zippy and it's generally quiet in operation bar the somewhat rattly disc tray (which, usefully, can be 'child-locked' to thwart prying fingers). Rapidly skipping through Chapters on the *Goodfellas* 4K platter, which previously caused an Oppo UDP-203 to lock up, has the same effect here, though – suggesting this title is not only a picture quality travesty, but either badly encoded or my disc is faulty.

A niggle is that Sony's user interface isn't exactly glamorous. The are some rather clunky fonts and it all looks a bit muted and utilitarian. That said, it's an easy environment to move around. The 'Apps' menu provides access to Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, YouTube, Spotify and Mubi, plus BBC iPlayer and Demand 5 – All4 and ITV Player are absent. The setup menus and handset Options key provide access to various noise reduction modes, output resolution, HDR conversion and image tweaks.

First of a new Sony breed

At this launch price, the UBP-X700 is not quite the bargain 4K spinner, although it's certainly stripped back on connectivity and has the same compact, lightweight design as Panasonic's cheaper DMP-UB320. But while some features have gone from its higher-end siblings, the UHD BD performance prowess remains, and the addition of Dolby Vision playback makes it the first step in a new direction for Sony. And in this multi-region guise, you can chuck any disc in it you like. Barring DVD-Audio... ■

1. The disc tray emerges from behind the UBP-X700's plastic front panel

2. Rear inputs are limited to HDMI, coaxial and Ethernet – there's no analogue audio option



HCC VERDICT



Sony UBP-X700

→ £270/£400 (modded) → www.sony.co.uk / www.tps.uk.com

WE SAY: Design and build don't dazzle here, and connectivity is limited, but the UBP-X700 lets Sony hit a new 4K price point – and appeal to Dolby Vision TV owners at the same time.

Job done, JBL

The entry-level Studio soundbar delivers an impressive performance from a single box and an agreeable price point, reckons **Mark Craven**



FROM THE SAME range as JBL's multichannel-capable Bar 5.1 [see HCC #283], only less ambitious, comes the Bar Studio. A subwoofer-free, 2.0-channel design aimed at mid-size flatscreen owners, it arrives in the UK with a £150 ticket, meaning it joins an already crowded market of budget 'bars.

Aesthetically, it's very clearly a baby brother of the Bar 5.1, featuring the same curved-edge perforated grille chassis and circular top-panel controls. It measures 61cm wide, making it a good fit for screens as small as 28in up to around 55in, and it's not particularly deep or tall, either. You should have no trouble

finding space for it.

The Bar Studio's left and right channels each get a 2in woofer and 1.5in tweeter, with a claimed 30W of amp power feeding the array. Frequency response is rated down to 60Hz.

Connections include optical digital audio, 3.5mm, USB, Bluetooth and

HDMI ARC (but no HDMI inputs for external sources). Not a bad selection considering the asking price.

A diminutive, slender remote is supplied that gives all functions equal-sized buttons. It does at least highlight the volume and bass level adjustment keys with a glossier finish, but is still the kind of zapper you need to peer at before using.

EQ on tap

A sound mode button on the handset cycles through five preset EQs (Standard, Movie, Music, Voice and Sports). Only a vertical line of LED status lights on the bar's left edge denotes which you are currently using – this same row also rises and falls with volume/bass changes.

There's also a surround mode, which kicks into life with a curious (and rather loud) bleepy sound effect. I'm normally wary of *faux* surround, especially from a two-channel device, but found this was able to noticeably expand the soundstage – skilfully casting a background police siren wide-left at one moment in *The Dark Tower* (Ultra HD Blu-ray) – without making a phalsey, echoey mess.

Alternatively, JBL's Movie preset is less concerned with width, instead favouring a

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVERS: 2 x 2in woofers; 2 x 1.5in tweeters

AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED): 30W

CONNECTIONS: 1 x HDMI ARC; optical digital audio input; 3.5mm minijack input; USB

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: No **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes

DIMENSIONS: 614(w) x 58(h) x 86(d)mm

WEIGHT: 1.4kg

FEATURES: 60Hz-20kHz claimed frequency response; Standard, Movie, Music, Voice and Sport presets; Bluetooth; wall-mount fixings supplied; Surround mode

more forceful, full-on presentation by bumping up the levels of atmospheric FX.

Even sticking to the Bar Studio's Standard EQ, it's straight-up 2.0 presentation is pretty impressive. An expected lack of scale (and no matter which preset you opt for, this budget offering is limited in this regard) is countered by a pleasing heft to its output and well-projected dialogue.

With *The Dark Tower*, the various inflections and accents of the cast are easy to discern, and the soundtrack's frequent use of lower frequencies (either for earthquake rumbles or moments of drama) have a genuine dynamic impact.

There's good separation too; the film's orchestral score, Foley and dialogue are cleanly delivered, rather than as a mush. Some treble details can exhibit a raspy edge at high volumes, though.

Multichannel may be off the menu, but the Bar Studio can still create a sense of immersion from a source. A dream/vision sequence in Chapter 3 of *The Dark Tower*, where Idris Elba and Dennis Haysbert turn and twist in a mist-shrouded forest, teases the playful sound design of its Atmos/TrueHD origins. And when Matthew McConaughey suddenly commands 'Stop breathing!', all close-mic'd and menacing, the effect remains spooky.

That there's no subwoofer isn't a major drag. Certainly it means an absence of genuine LFE, but on other hand it lets this single-enclosure system show a good balance and cohesion between bass and mids. And it's one less box to think about.

Overall, the Bar Studio is a neat proposition, and ripe for a no-frills second-room setup ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Stereo soundbar with HDMI ARC

POSITION: JBL's entry-level soundbar, and only one without a sub

PEERS: Acoustic Energy Sound3ar; LG SJ2

HCC VERDICT



JBL Bar Studio

→ £150 → www.jbl.com

WE SAY: Connectivity is solid on this budget 'bar, as is overall sonic performance. Virtual surround is worth playing with too.

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Apple's sweet fix for 4K movie fans

To **John Archer**'s surprise, Apple has finally delivered a truly innovative streaming box that won't look out of place in a forward-thinking AV room

I'VE NEVER ENTIRELY 'got' the whole Apple TV thing. Aside from boasting usually pretty slick interfaces, these streaming boxes have felt consistently overpriced and off the pace in terms of both the amount of useful content they offer and their AV quality.

With the latest Apple TV 4K, though, the mega-brand has suddenly made me a believer. Here, finally, is a device that combines a push for picture quality with a compelling value proposition. It should be enough to make any Apple-phobe sit up and take notice.

Who you callin' square?

The Apple TV 4K doesn't house its cutting-edge capabilities in a cutting-edge design, though. For a brand that prides itself on aesthetics, this small but chunky black square feels almost bizarrely drab.

The beauty here is on the inside. The OS is driven by the same A10X chip Apple uses in its iPad Pro, which provides four times the graphical power of the chip inside the previous, non-4K Apple TV. Its HDMI output is now capable of sending not just 4K resolution video but high dynamic range (HDR) content too. The tvOS operating system is capable of running iOS apps and handling a much more graphically rich interface.

And Apple hasn't just embraced HDR. It's embraced Dolby Vision HDR. If you have a Dolby Vision-capable TV, the Apple TV 4K will recognise it automatically and ask you if you want to set your box to Dolby Vision mode.

This is no mere Dolby Vision lip-service, either. There's already a startling number of movies available in Dolby Vision on iTunes, even here in the UK where other services (looking at you, Amazon Video) have remained strangely shy about offering the format.

As well as giving us hitherto only dreamed of amounts of HDR and Dolby Vision streams, Apple has thrown the cat amongst the pigeons when it comes to pricing – it's made all of its 4K HDR iTunes content available for the same price as its HD content, around £9.99 on average. Prior to Apple's announcement, you routinely had to cough up £25 or more to 'own' a streamable 4K film. Since the launch of this aggressive pricing policy some rival platforms have followed suit. However, none offer nearly as many 4K HDR films at the same sort of cost.

This means Apple TV is now a huge draw for home cinema fans. And if you own an Apple TV 4K box, the company automatically updates for free any HD movies you might already own in iTunes to their 4K HDR counterparts where such versions are available. Excellent.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
4K HDR streaming/
app box

POSITION:
Above the ongoing
HD-only 4th-gen
Apple TV

PEERS:
Roku Streaming
Stick+;
Amazon Fire TV

There are riders to add to all this 4K movie excitement, of course. First, you'll need at least 15Mbps of broadband speed to enjoy Apple's 4K streams. Also, while the iTunes streams are of a good quality, they don't look as good as most 4K Blu-rays. Finally, the Apple TV 4K doesn't (yet) support Dolby Atmos or DTS:X audio.

Therefore, you need to think carefully about how prepared you are to invest much of your movie viewing future in Apple's eco-system rather than sticking with

'If you want to take advantage of the excellent iTunes movie service, Apple TV 4K comes into its own'

4K Blu-ray, or combining both. The convenience and relative affordability of Apple's 4K offering comes with performance compromises.

I personally doubt Atmos will come, and even if it does, it will be the compressed DD+ version, not the higher-quality Dolby TrueHD iteration carried by 4K discs. On the other hand, iTunes offers many films in Dolby Vision that are only available in HDR10 on 4K Blu-ray. So there are pros and cons to weigh up.

Getting better with age

I'm covering the Apple TV 4K here a few months after its initial release, and this delay has actually been kind to it. Importantly, it's given Apple time to add an update which fixes an at-launch situation that saw every source output in whatever output format you'd got selected in the Apple TV 4K's menus. So if you had a Dolby Vision TV, you could, for instance, actually find yourself watching *EastEnders* from the BBC iPlayer in 'Dolby Vision'. Except, of course, that it wasn't really Dolby Vision, but some weird-looking SDR to Dolby Vision HDR conversion. The options now exist in the user interface to have the box output whatever video format a chosen source natively uses.

Another feature added since launch is an app for Amazon Prime Video. A much-reported tiff between Apple and Amazon has seen previous Apple TV boxes lacking an Amazon video app – a deal-breaker for some people. Peace has broken out now, and you get Prime Video with 4K and HDR support. Netflix is also there in its 4K and HDR guise, along with all the UK's key catchup TV services and plenty more video options besides. The only major absentee is YouTube in 4K/HDR, due to Apple not supporting the open-source VP9 streaming format.

Neither the Amazon or Netflix apps run as smoothly and effectively as I've seen them on other platforms, including

2



SPECIFICATIONS

CONNECTIONS: Lightning charging port (remote); HDMI output; Ethernet
AUDIO FORMAT SUPPORT: HE-AAC; AAC; MP3; MP3 VBR; Apple Lossless; FLAC; AIFF; WAV; Dolby Digital 5.1; Dolby Digital+ (to 7.1)

VIDEO FORMAT SUPPORT: H.264/HEVC SDR video up to 2160p60; HEVC Dolby Vision (Profile 5)/HDR10 (Main 10 profile) up to 2160p; MPEG-4 (M4V, MP4, MOV)

DIMENSIONS: 98(w) x 35(h) x 98(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 0.425kg

FEATURES: Wi-Fi; Bluetooth; extensive 4K HDR10 and Dolby Vision support on iTunes; Siri voice control; remote with touchpad, accelerometer and gyroscope features; Netflix/Amazon/catchup TV apps; games library; A10X processor

PARTNER WITH



LG OLED55B7: This 2017 entry-level LG OLED is now priced at an enticing £1,800 (or even less depending on retailer). 4K HDR playback is joined by Dolby Vision support, and the webOS 3.5 interface makes it easy and fun to drive.

some smart TVs. But they're there and they're functional, and that's just about enough.

Since tvOS ties in so closely with Apple's iOS platform, there's a huge selection of niche video and non-video apps available for you to download. As with all such busy app environments, the quality on offer varies enormously. But there's some good stuff in there, and Apple's 'store' does a fine job of highlighting the best efforts.

Some of the Apple TV games are impressive in terms of both their scope and graphics. That said, the Apple TV 4K is no replacement for any modern console. Games are designed to be controlled using Apple's small, ultra-thin remote control. This may be impressive technically, with its ultra-sensitive touchpad section, edge-mounted pressure sensor, and built-in accelerometer and gyro motion detectors, but it proves a frustratingly imprecise, limiting and fiddly way of interacting with the majority of games. I also often found it a rather over-fussy way of navigating the box's onscreen menus.

At least those menus work well. The GUI is clean and attractive, especially if you take the time to pop related app icons into themed folders, and customise its icon layout. In both these respects it crushes the cluttered Android-resembling menus of the new Amazon Fire TV. Apple's Siri platform is an effective voice operating system too.

Not everyone should pick an Apple TV 4K over the latest Amazon Fire TV, though. The latter costs well under half as much as the £180 32GB Apple TV 4K, never mind the £200 64GB version. For a relatively casual streamer for 4K video-on-demand and catchup access the Fire TV could be the better option. It's only if you want to take advantage of the excellent iTunes movie service, or are already invested in Apple's software and hardware landscape, that the Apple TV 4K comes into its own. It's a clear step forward for the brand, though ■

1. The iTunes movie store prices 4K titles the same as HD versions

2. Using the Ethernet connection is recommended for 4K HDR streaming

HCC VERDICT



Apple TV 4K

→ From £180 → www.apple.co.uk

WE SAY: With its well-priced and well-stocked iTunes movie service, Apple is on to a winner here. An obvious audition if you favour a streaming lifestyle over physical media.

Burning desire

Martin Pipe scratches the surface of Nero's comprehensive Platinum 2018 multimedia suite



The latest Platinum Suite works on Windows 7 (and later) PCs



editor) and carry out updates. The process took 20 minutes or so on my PC. Said programs are split between five categories in the 'QuickStart' launch-screen, alongside a KnowHow help section. The overall appearance owes more than a little to the latest version of Microsoft's operating system.

Double trouble

First up is 'Manage and Play', concerned with the location and playback of local or networked media (and with a neat feature that roots out unwanted 'doubles' of your photos). Media can be played locally, or pushed to network media players or smart TVs.

Although the MediaHome player behind the latter works well, being able to handle all of the major file types and codecs, I experienced trouble getting the associated 'MediaBrowser' to search folders stored on a NAS. Yet these could be seen by Windows, from which movies could be opened. More positively, subtitle support has been improved – and there's full compatibility with the new H.265/HEVC video codec.

Nero Video 2018 (in the 'Edit & Convert' category) is a capable non-linear video editor with the expected input options (note that it caters for the smartphone video you were daft enough to capture vertically), timeline structure, scene detection/export, transitions and effects. Your epic can be exported to a file, or burnt to disc (with menus). Then there's Nero Recode, which converts video from one form/codec to another. This module impressed me particularly as it accepts high-definition off-air transport streams captured with a TV tuner card. Basic trimming is supported, as is the ability to pass through Dolby Digital soundtracks without lip-sync delays.

WHEN IT FIRST shipped more than twenty years ago, this German software was known as 'Nero Burning ROM'. As the name suggests, its sole purpose was to write ('burn') data or music to blank CD-R and CD-RW media. We might laugh now, but back then the latter's 650MB capacity was a big deal, as was the ability to compile your own music CDs. Over the past two decades, though, Nero has evolved into a comprehensive multimedia suite covering audio, video (SD to 4K), photos, the internet and locally networked content. To reflect this, the 'Burning ROM' moniker was dropped – fear not; the ability to burn discs is still available.

Now in 2018 form, the Nero Platinum suite consists of no fewer than seventeen basic elements. No wonder it takes a while to install on a Windows 7 (or later) PC – especially if you install the supplied content packs (templates and video effects for the video

SPECIFICATIONS

MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS: Windows 7 (Service Pack 1); 2GHz processor (64-bit for 4K editing); 1GB RAM; 5GB hard disk space; DirectX-compatible graphics card; DVD drive
CODEC SUPPORT: MP3; FLAC; AAC; WAV; APE; OGG; MPEG; FLV; MP4; H.264; H.265

FEATURES: DuplicateManager; video editor with disc export (and menu templates); media organiser; free apps/programs (DJ tool, 360 VR viewer, etc); import, edit and play SD/HD/4K content; burn to CD/DVD/Blu-ray; cover art/Gracenote; rip CDs and non-copyrighted DVDs; archive/backup data

'Rip & Burn' lets you convert audio CDs into a capacity-efficient form optimised for smart devices – most discs/tracks are recognised by the Gracenote database. Non-copyrighted DVDs can also be ripped here. To go the other way, Burning ROM can be used to write material to CD, DVD and Blu-ray discs; it can also rip CDs, and with far more flexibility when it comes to the output (lossless compression, for example). To achieve the same flexibility with your video discs, though, Nero Recode is required.

Nero Express, meanwhile, eases the copying of discs. You even get a disc cover designer to give your homespun media a professional sheen.

For data there's the 'Backup & Restore' category. This is concerned with making secure selective copies of your irreplaceable files, so that the impact of hardware failures are minimised. For corrupted memory cards, accidental deletions and dodgy drives that haven't been backed up, Nero includes a rescue agent that scans them for useful data. SecurDisc uses encryption and redundancy to ensure your personal information isn't compromised. Yet annoyingly Nero no longer offers an external cloud backup function.

Last up is 'Extras', which includes software configuration and a handy program that captures audio from internet radio stations. You're also steered towards mobile apps and other downloadable extras and updates.

You'll be impressed with the sheer functionality that Nero has crammed into this suite, although there are one or two bugs and integration could be a little better. And yes, a significant proportion of the functionality exists in freeware that can be easily found online. But that has no integration at all ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Multimedia software suite for Windows

POSITION: Top-of-the-range version, with additional 'content packs'

PEERS: Roxio Creator; various freeware

HCC VERDICT



Nero Platinum 2018
→ £80 → www.nero.com

WE SAY: Well-featured suite that will provide hours of fun. It could be better integrated, though, and exhibits a few bugs.



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Pana gets smart

Alexa better watch her back – the gutsy Google-powered SC-GA10 speaker is a class apart when it comes to sound quality, says **Steve May**



Twin tweeters and a 3in woofer lurk inside

MORE OFTEN THAN not, buying a smart speaker has involved some degree of performance compromise. While there's no shortage of good-sounding Bluetooth speakers around, even the best smart speakers tend to be rather less tuneful.

Panasonic aims to change that with the SC-GA10. This Google Assistant desktop speaker has been designed from the outset to sound a class above.

Amazon Alexa may rule the connected speaker sector, but Google's AI ecosystem is maturing rapidly. Compatibility now straddles mobile devices, TVs and media players, with gains in functionality. For example, you can now tell your speaker to play Netflix on a connected Android TV, which is nothing if not cool.

The platform is increasingly looking like an attractive addition to any media cinema setup.

In addition to voice-driven Google smarts, the SC-GA10 has Chromecast Built-in. This means you can cast directly from scores of apps, including Deezer, TuneIn, Google Play

and Spotify. Panasonic's desktop diva will also function within a wider Chromecast multiroom speaker environment.

Build quality is impressive. The metallic base and wraparound fabric cover are suitably swish; there's a choice between black or white finishes. The speaker is a good deal larger than an Amazon Echo, standing 284mm tall, and weighs a respectable 1.7kg.

In addition to a connection for the power brick, there's a 3.5mm input jack for a hard-wired music source. The speaker also offers Bluetooth connection.

The setup routine, standard for all Google Assistant devices, is painless. You'll be up and running just a few minutes after downloading the Google Home app. Panasonic's own Music Control app can be used for direct control, with bass and treble adjustments, but it's not essential.

Brains and brawn

In the context of a standalone smart speaker, the performance of the SC-GA10 is startling. It sounds gloriously fulsome. The mid-range is smooth while bass is weighty and impactful. And despite the tower block design, the soundstage is far from narrow. There's enough width and volume to comfortably fill an average-sized room, and off-axis listening is fine.

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVERS: 2 x 20mm dome tweeters; 1 x 3in cone woofer **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 2 x 20W **CONNECTIONS:** 3.5mm analogue input **DIMENSIONS:** 100(w) x 284(h) x 100(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 1.7kg

FEATURES: Chromecast Built-In; Google Assistant; audio format support includes FLAC 24-bit/192kHz, ALAC, AIFF, WAV and MP3 via the Panasonic Music Control app; preset EQ modes; Bluetooth v4.2; dual-band Wi-Fi; voice control of Spotify, Google Play Music, TuneIn internet radio and more

Two offset 20mm soft dome tweeters, each fronted by a custom diffuser, spread the sound. These are supported by a deceptively powerful 3in woofer, allied to a snaking bass reflex port, which does a good job of enhancing richness and tonality.

The power output is rated at 2 x 20W, but this rather underplays just how gutsy it sounds. Led Zeppelin's *Immigrant Song* comes across with rollicking musicality, while the throbbing electronic rhythms of *Goblin*, from the OST of Italian splatter movie *Beyond the Darkness*, are crisp and mesmeric.

Inevitably, it doesn't sound overly stereophonic. The psychedelic pop of The Damned's *Standing On The Edge of Tomorrow* has a velveteen, multi-tracked chorus amid jangling guitars and pitter-patter percussion. The SC-GA10 isn't able to separate the instruments in the mix, instead just gushing the whole lot out, but it sounds neither thin nor stressed.

In context, I'd rate its performance as immeasurably better than Google's own Google Home speaker, and comparable with multiroom speaker offerings like the Sonos Play:1 and HEOS 1.

If there's a caveat, it's with the speaker's noise-cancelling microphone array. Playing at only moderate levels, the GA10 just doesn't seem to hear its 'Hey Google' wake up call. I ended up more than once shouting at the device in an entirely inappropriate manner. The best way to manage playback volume is either by using the on-body controls, or Panasonic's own app.

The asking price is comfortably higher than Amazon's Echo speakers (so will put many buyers off), but then it really does have a decent set of pipes. The SC-GA10 might even end up giving smart speakers a good name ■

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic SC-GA10

→ £230 → www.panasonic.co.uk

WE SAY: The SC-GA10 is a thumpingly good sound system that just happens to have a brain the size of a planet.

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Google Assistant smart speaker

POSITION: The first desktop smart speaker from the brand

PEERS: Amazon Echo; Apple Homepod; Google Home



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SETC240WSF-ATR	2340 x 1320	92" x 52"	2935 x 155 x 170	16:9
SETC270WSF-ATR	2670 x 1500	105" x 59"	3245 x 155 x 170	16:9

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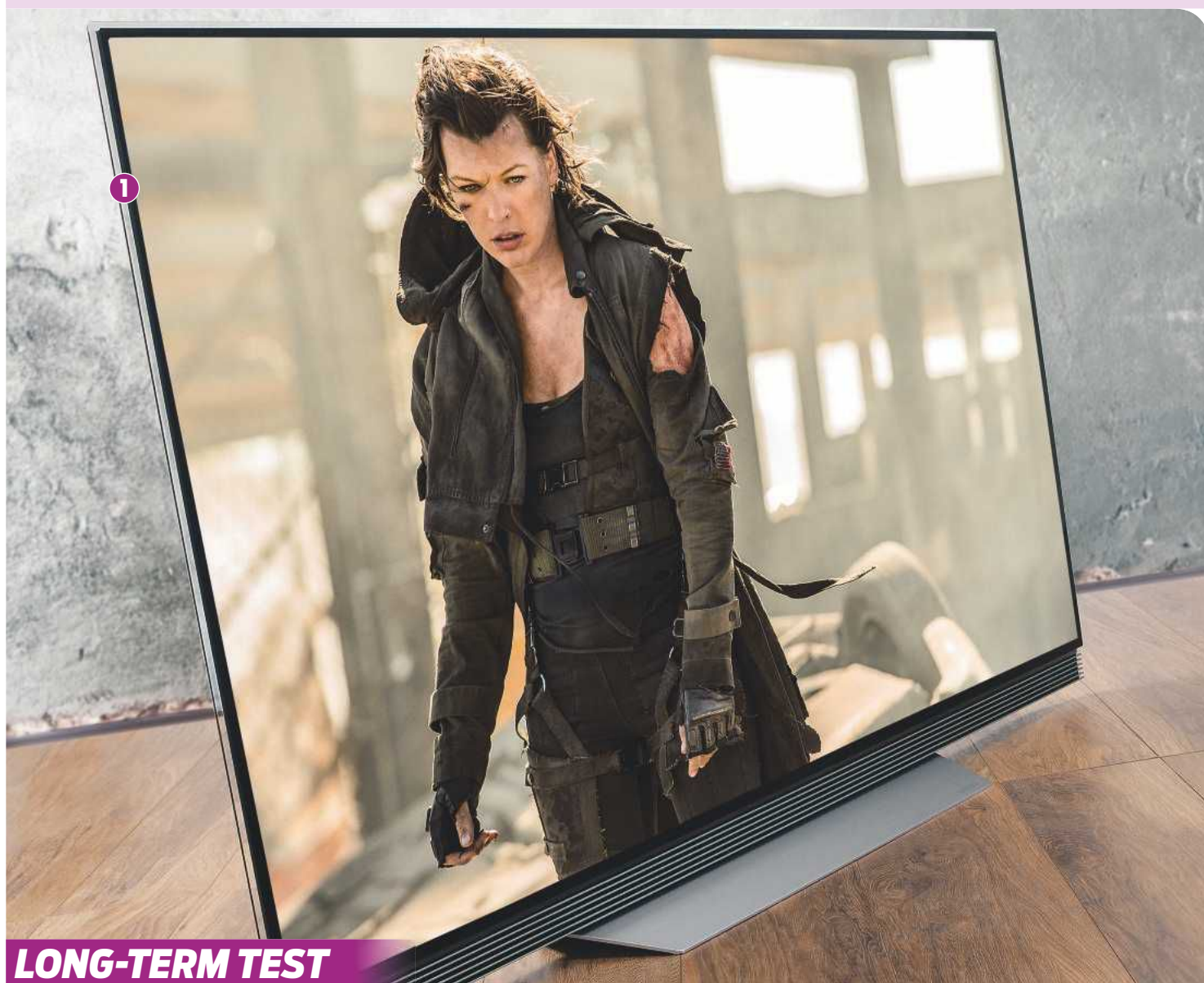
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**LONG-TERM TEST**

LG OLED65E7

TIME ON TEST: 6 months **REVIEWER:** John Archer

LG'S 2017 OLED range won plaudits galore, and this 65in E7 model was especially championed as the ideal blend of next-gen TV smarts, stunning glass-backed design and a still sensible price tag. Having now lived with one for a good few months, does the OLED65E7 still feel like the last word in home cinema glory?

What's good about it?

The OLED technology at this TV's heart is perfectly pitched for home cinema viewing. You only have to see a dark scene in a favourite movie for a few seconds to instantly appreciate the OLED advantage.

Black levels are deeper and more consistent across the screen than any LCD TV could dream of. And they are matched by beautifully vivid colours (solid blacks typically help deliver richer looking tones) and wonderfully bold whites. The image looks all the more

intense but also natural. Around the most contrasted areas, the self-emissive nature of OLED means there's no unsightly light-stripping or haloing around objects to try to ignore.

LG's masterful light control, which is particularly evident with high dynamic range (HDR) sources, sometimes almost persuades you that the OLED65E7's imagery is brighter than that of the most premium LCD TVs.

This isn't empirically true; the E7 tops out at a brightness level of around 800 nits, compared with the 1,500 nits (and higher) on offer from the likes of Sony's ZD9 models or Samsung's KS9500. This just proves that contrast can trump brightness in terms of raw picture impact.

This screen also scores brownie points for its support of the Dolby Vision (DV) HDR format. With Sony still dawdling over its DV firmware roll out in Europe, LG's TVs remain the only 'affordable' option for viewing DV content from either streaming services or 4K Blu-rays in the UK.

The E7's performance with Dolby Vision isn't currently faultless, for reasons discussed later. But generally I've

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
65in 4K OLED with
Dolby Vision HDR

POSITION:
Mid-range in LG's
2017 lineup

PEERS:
Sony KD-65A1;
Samsung QE65Q9F

found DV presentations offering slightly more colour, contrast and detail precision than their corresponding HDR10 iterations, making it a definite plus point of this LG.

I remain a huge fan of the TV's design. Placing the OLED 'film' directly onto a sheet of glass creates an almost impossibly slim-looking telly. The glass subtly extends beyond the edges of the main panel frame to create an eye-catching, floating tech vibe.

This slim design is combined with a powerful audio system, courtesy of what's essentially an integrated soundbar attached to the E7's bottom edge. This disrupts the cleanliness of the design less than you would expect,

'For now, the OLED65E7 remains the best OLED TV LG has ever made. And that's saying something'

and is potent enough to deliver at least some of the height and width you'd hope to hear from the Dolby Atmos soundtracks the TV is capable of decoding.

Okay, the Dolby Atmos effect is more like a vertical wall of sound than the immersive audio bubble created by a full discrete sound system. It could also be argued that claiming Dolby Atmos support from a mere TV speaker array somewhat devalues the meaning of Dolby Atmos. But none of that stops it being an enjoyable flatscreen audio performance.

The E7 carries LG's webOS smart system, and this is another feature that I'm still more than happy with. It manages to feel more straightforward, slicker and easier to use than any rival system bar, perhaps, Panasonic's My Home Screen 3.0.

The row of content link icons I've accumulated on the home screen has got a bit unwieldy, although it's impressively easy to move your absolute favourite content tabs and apps to the left side of the row for faster access.

2

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; Dolby Vision; HLG; Technicolor **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD, plus CI slot **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB; optical digital audio output; Ethernet; RS-232 **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 60W (including 20W subwoofer) **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 1,000 nit peaks **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,461(w) x 877(h) x 62(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 21.2kg

FEATURES: WebOS 3.5 smart system; built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback; built-in soundbar with Dolby Atmos audio decoding from streamed content; Freeview Play catchup TV platform support; Netflix, Amazon and Now TV apps built in; HDR effect; Magic Remote; Picture-On-Glass design

What's not so good about it?

The longer I've lived with this LG, the more I've found myself noticing its occasional performance issues.

First and worst, if you watch Dolby Vision sources from external, HDMI-connected equipment, dark scenes can suddenly be infiltrated by stark and distracting amounts of greyness. Dolby recently acknowledged that this is caused by a bug in its Dolby Vision application, and issued a fix that LG has now applied to the OLED65E7. Yet while this certainly reduces the occurrences of the greyness issue, it hasn't completely removed it. Hopefully a more comprehensive solution will appear eventually.

I've also regularly seen vertical light inconsistencies in the image during mid-dark scenes. During the early stages of *American Made* (4K BD) for instance, the dark cockpit sequences reveal some quite marked banding.

Another slight annoyance is that my preferred, relatively bright, 'Standard' picture setting for HDR viewing can feature areas of colour looking quite noisy. This noise reduces with a less bright preset in play, but the picture then lacks the sort of intensity and impact I'm after; I haven't managed to find a perfect combination of settings that satisfies my lust for HDR brightness while keeping the noise as low as I'd like.

A final issue that's caused a few frustrations is how much the OLED65E7 viewing experience is affected by ambient light. Its screen is more reflective than many LCD rivals. Add in its lack of brightness versus some LCD models and it can make movie viewing in daylight conditions a little frustrating.

Should I buy it?

As an all-round package, this LG 65-incher is among the very best sets of the past 12-18 months. Picture performance arguments can be made in favour of Sony's A1 and Panasonic's EZ952 OLED TVs, both of which carry superior video processing. Neither of these rival sets, however, combine their strong pictures with the funky glass-back design, nifty Dolby Atmos audio abilities, and current Dolby Vision skills of the OLED65E7.

It will be interesting how much LG's new Alpha 9 video processor will improve things with 2018's upcoming E8 series. For now, though, the OLED65E7 remains the best OLED TV LG has ever made. And that's saying something ■

1. The TV offers a Magic Sound Tuning mode to tailor its audio to your room

2. For its 2017 OLED, LG increased peak luminance by 20 per cent, but dropped 3D...



HCC VERDICT



LG OLED65E7

→ £3,800 → www.lg.com/uk

WE SAY: Although living with an OLED65E7 has made me more rather than less aware of its failings, it remains a fine all-round proposition – especially at its current 'end of life' price.

WIN! A Damson S-Series Wireless Dolby Atmos system

ENTER NOW!
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IN THIS ISSUE we're teaming up with UK sound corp Damson Audio to give away its S-Series Dolby Atmos package worth £800. This innovative all-in-one speaker bundle delivers 5.1.2 home cinema sonics from a discreet, compact design – without the need for lengthy cable runs or retrofitting speakers into your ceiling.

Plug and play

The hub of Damson's system, which launches in the UK this April, is the cutely styled S-Woofer. Not only does this vertical-standing bass box deliver low-end home cinema and music thrills, it packs state-of-the-art connectivity to integrate your sources with the S-Series. Dual HDMI inputs, and an HDMI (ARC) output, support 4K video passthrough (with Dolby Vision and HDR10), so you can hook up your TV, Blu-ray deck and games console and be ready to go. Bluetooth and a 3.5mm input cater to other devices.

Damson's S-Woofer processes incoming digital audio signals (including Dolby Atmos) and,

using the company's proprietary JetStreamNet wireless transmission system, delivers them on to the other S-Series speakers. In this full surround sound package, they are the left/centre/right-channel S-Bar soundbar; the upward-firing S-Atmos module that docks into the S-Bar; and the wireless Lithium-ion battery-powered S-Cube surrounds.

Cleverly, the subwoofer provides automatic EQ, assessing speaker distances and adjusting levels to suit, making the S-Series a true plug-and-play proposition.

The S-Cubes have another trick – standalone playback. As each unit offers Bluetooth and aux inputs, it can function as a dedicated music speaker, either on its own, in a stereo pair, or in a multiroom system using as many as eight S-Cubes.

Fancy being in with a chance of winning this cutting-edge wireless home cinema system? Simply answer the question opposite correctly – and good luck! ■

For more information on Damson's S-Series and other audio innovations, visit www.damsonglobal.com

'This innovative speaker bundle delivers 5.1.2 home cinema sonics from a discreet, compact design – without the need for lengthy cable runs or fitting ceiling speakers'



Be in with a chance of winning the Damson S-Series Atmos package by answering the following film-related question:

Q: Matt Damon starred in which film adapted from a Philip K. Dick story?

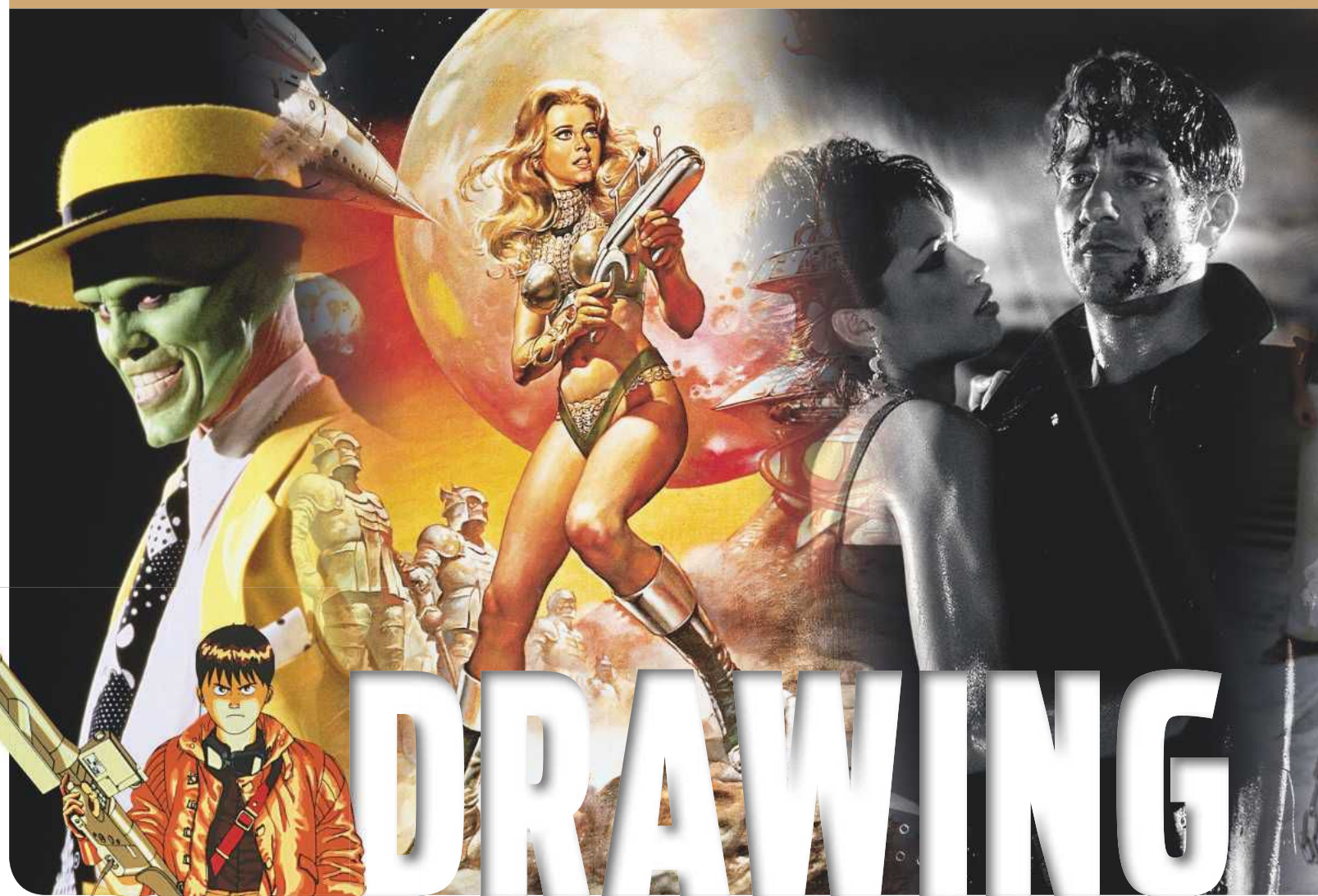
A) A SCANNER DARKLY B) TOTAL RECALL C) THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU

HOW TO ENTER: Simply email your answer (either A, B or C) to competitions@homecinemachoice.com with the subject line 'Damson'. You must include your name, address and contact telephone number.

THE CLOSING DATE for this competition is April 26, 2018. Please read the terms and conditions (opposite) before sending in your entry.

Competition rules

1. The first entry drawn at random will win the prize. **2.** Only one entry per person/household; multiple entries will be discarded. **3.** Entrants from the UK only. **4.** Employees of MyTimeMedia Ltd and companies supplying competition prizes are not eligible to enter this competition. **5.** Please ensure your personal details are correct, as they will be used to contact you if you win. **6.** No alternatives, cash or otherwise, will be offered to the winner as prizes. **7.** The editor's decision is final. **8.** Comp winners' info available upon request. **9.** The closing date for entries is April 26, 2018.



Away from Marvel and DC, there's a wealth of comic strips and graphic novels that have been adapted for cinema. **Anton van Beek** reads up on some of the most unexpected examples...

You didn't think Hollywood had its own original ideas, did you?

THE PAST DECADE has seen a seismic shift in the cinematic landscape. Super-powered heroes ripped straight from the pages of comic books have become the most popular (not to mention, most lucrative) action icons at the box office.

However, superhero flicks are only the most high-profile examples of filmmakers drawing

on comic strips and graphic novels for ideas for movies. And just as there's far more to comics than rubber-suited super-beings leaping around and punching one another, the same is also true of the

movies based upon them.

Take, for instance, Armando Iannucci's *The Death of Stalin*, which made its Blu-ray and DVD debut at the

end of February. At first glance a satire about the political turmoil that followed the demise of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin seems like precisely the sort of thing that the brains behind *The Thick of It* and *Veep* would come up with as an idea for a feature film. Yet the movie is actually based on the French graphic novel *La mort de Staline*.

Adult themes

The more you look, the more you find the influence of comics in Hollywood, and while *The Death of Stalin* stands in stark contrast to what many would expect from a comic book adaptation, it's hardly alone in doing so. Both Sam Mendes's Depression-era crime thriller *The Road to Perdition* (1998) and David Cronenberg's brutal *A History of Violence* (2005) are based on critically-acclaimed graphic novels. *Oldboy* (2003), the second part of Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook's ultra-violent 'Vengeance Trilogy', originated as a Japanese manga.

Even further away from superhero action are more 'traditional' dramas exploring adults themes in ways that make them feel right at home in arthouse





INSPIRATION

cinemas. Examples include the sexually explicit French-language lesbian relationship drama *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013); the bigscreen version of Posey Simmons's bawdy, Thomas Hardy-referencing *Guardian* newspaper strip *Tamara Drewe* (2010); and Terry Zwigoff's supremely funny study of teenage friendship, *Ghost World* (2001). The last of these played a sizeable part in marking out Scarlett Johansson as a future Hollywood star and is well worth tracking down if you haven't already done so – especially now that it's available as part of the Criterion Collection Blu-ray lineup in the US.

From the unforgettably titled ultra-low-budget Japanese gore-fest *Big Tits Zombie* (2010) and the erotic chills of Michele Soavi's *Dellamorte Dellamore* (1994), to more mainstream monster movies such as *Swamp Thing* (1982) and *Man-Thing* (2005), horror comics have also proven irresistible to filmmakers over the decades.

Pick of the bunch is arguably *30 Days of Night* (2007). Directed by David Slade, this tense and terrifying flick adapts writer Steve Niles and artist Ben Templesmith's innovative vampire comic, focusing on a gang of bloodsuckers besieging an isolated Alaskan town just as 30 days of uninterrupted darkness begins...

Sadly, the decision to follow it up with a couple of web series (2007's *Blood Trails* and 2008's *Dust to Dust*), and the dismal direct-to-DVD sequel *30 Days of Night: Dark Days* (2010),



Howard... laid an egg at the box office



Tom Hanks goes on the run in *Road to Perdition*

soon drove a stake straight through the heart of this prospective franchise.

Mike Mignola's paranormal detective Hellboy fared a little better on the bigscreen, with Oscar-winner Guillermo del Toro directing two action-packed films based on the heavily stylised comics: 2004's *Hellboy* and 2008's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*. And although del Toro never got the chance to complete his planned trilogy, a cinematic reboot is currently being shot, helmed by Neil Marshall. Fans should also check out the two *Hellboy* animated features, *Sword of Storms* (2007) and *Blood and Iron* (2008), which are available on DVD in the UK and region A-locked BD in the US.

It would also be remiss not to mention the grand-daddy of all horror comics, EC's *Tales from the Crypt*. First brought to the silver screen in 1972 as a portmanteau movie adapting five stories from the comic, the *Tales from the Crypt* name was more recently used to 'Present' a trio of lacklustre original fright flicks: *Demon Knight* (1995), *Bordello of Blood* (1996) and *Ritual* (2002). In this instance, the best screen incarnation remains HBO's cable TV series that ran for 93 episodes between 1989 and 1996.

Running wild

Action has always been a major component in comic book storytelling, even when superheroes aren't actually involved. After all, on the page you can >

From screen to page

The relationship between comic books and movies is a two-way street...



While Hollywood has a long history of turning comic books into films, the reverse is also true.

It shouldn't surprise anyone that Disney saw the appeal of licensing characters from its animated films and shorts for use in comics as far back as the 1940s.

However, it was the sci-fi boom of the 1970s that saw the idea take hold, with Marvel releasing hit comics based on *Planet of the Apes*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey* and *Star Wars*. And since reacquiring the licence in 2015, *Star Wars* titles regularly rank among Marvel's biggest-selling monthly comics.



During the late 1980s/early 1990s, independent publisher Dark Horse exploded into the mainstream with a slate of popular film-based comics. It was in those pages that the titular critters from the *Alien* and *Predator* franchises first came to blows (an idea that Hollywood later took back to the bigscreen... and made a hash of). More recently it published an *Alien/Predator/Prometheus* crossover that was more adventurous than any of Ridley Scott's prequels.



So when your favourite film series comes to an end, it's worth seeing if it's living on elsewhere. Everyone from RoboCop and Tony Montana to Freddy Krueger and Marty McFly have continued to have adventures on the printed page.

V for Vendetta (right) disappointed fans of Alan Moore's acclaimed comic book



Hellboy will soon be back on the bigscreen

let your imagination run wild with scenes that would simply be too cost prohibitive to do in real-life. Not that this has stopped filmmakers from giving it their best shot.

So, whether you fancy watching bloody swordplay (the *Lone Wolf and Cub* films, 1972-1974); high-flying heroics (*The Rocketeer*, 1991); swords and sorcery (*Red Sonja*, 1985); Cold War espionage (*Atomic Blonde*, 2017); spectacular space opera (*Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets*, 2017); alien-busting government agencies (the *Men in Black* trilogy, 1997-2012, see p104); retired black ops agents (*RED* and its sequel, 2010/2013); fascistic future cops (*Judge Dredd* and *Dredd*, 1995/2012); time-travelling martial arts (*Timecop*, 1994); ultra-violent spy spoofs (the *Kingsman* films, 2014/2017); bizarre genre mash-ups (*Cowboys & Aliens*, 2011); or Pamela Anderson in a near-future remake of *Casablanca* (*Barb Wire*, 1996), there's a comic book adaptation that will cater to your specific action movie needs.

Capturing the right look

It is at least slightly easier to recognise that a film is based on a comic strip or graphic novel when it goes out of its way to look like one. Roger Vadim's iconic sci-fi classic *Barbarella*, Mario Bava's *Danger: Diabolik* (both 1968) and Mike Hodges' *Flash Gordon* (1980) boast a pop-art aesthetic that ensures that they have the look and feel of comic book panels come to life.

Meanwhile, Chuck Russell's *The Mask* (1994) married Jim Carrey's manic energy and physicality to cutting-edge CG effects in order to capture the wild inventiveness and cartoonish bombast of the original comics.

Warren Beatty evoked the comic strip origins of Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy* in his 1990 adaptation by limiting the film's palette to just seven colours. Filmmakers Robert Rodriguez and Zack Snyder went even further with their respective adaptations of Frank Miller's noir-inspired *Sin City* (2005) and historical war story *300* (2006), not just emulating the distinctive



Persepolis (above) and Ghost World (below) tackle more personal dramas



look of Miller's artwork, but actually recreating panels. For the latter, we recommend importing the all-region 300: *The Complete Experience* BD from the US for an exhaustive look at how this was achieved.

Of course, it's even easier to perfectly recreate the look of a comic when working in animation. It's no surprise then that the medium has proved fruitful when it comes to adapting comics for the bigscreen, be it one of the *Charlie Brown* 'toons (1969-2015), the edgy sci-fi action of *Heavy Metal* (1981), the nuclear anxiety of *When the Wind Blows* (1986) or the screen version of Marjane Satrapi's moving autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis* (2007).

And that's not even taking Japan into account. Thanks to that country's far greater acceptance of comics (aka manga), an entire industry has grown up around producing animated adaptations for cinema. Internationally renown titles such as Katsuhiro Otomo's post-apocalyptic dystopian sci-fi *Akira* (1988) and Masamune Shirow's cyberpunk thriller *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) are merely the tip of an unfathomably large iceberg.

Moore mistakes

One thing that's been proven time and again is that great source material is no guarantee of a great film. Just look at Robert Altman's curiously joyless *Popeye* (1980), or try to forget the George Lucas-produced 1986 box office bomb *Howard the Duck*.

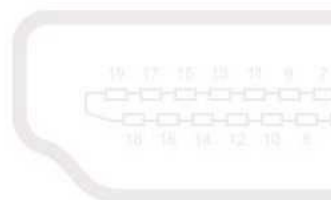
This becomes even more of an issue when a director or producer attempts to reshape the material to fit their own vision. So spare a thought here for Alan Moore. He may have been called one of the greatest comic writers of all time by critics and peers, but that hasn't stopped Hollywood from butchering some of his most acclaimed works – *From Hell* (2001), *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) and *V for Vendetta* (2005) – on the journey to the bigscreen. Maybe the TV iteration of *Watchmen* that is planned by HBO will do his work justice, offering the space needed to capture both the scale and the nuances of Moore's story. If so, it could be the next big step for comic book adaptations ■



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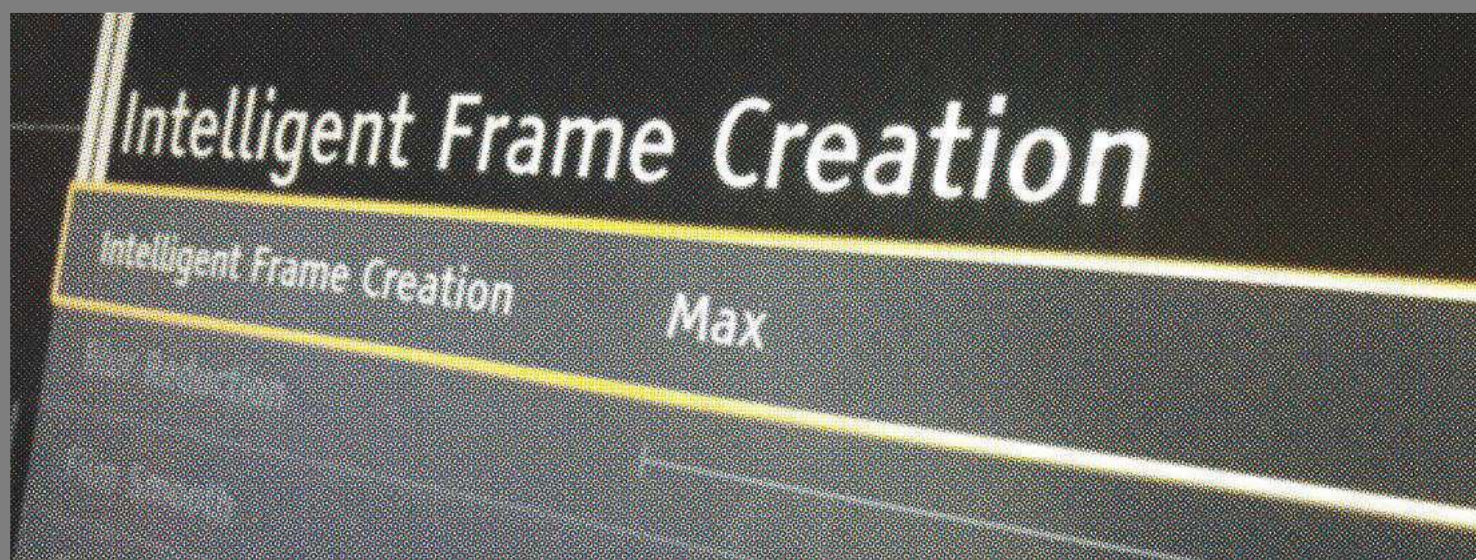
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Mark Craven HCC March 2017





Digital Copy

As part of the evolution of home cinema, display manufacturers have got ever slicker when it comes to motion smoothing technology. But **Mark Craven** still hates it with a passion

WHILE AT THE Sound & Vision Show in late February, my colleague (and *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* editor) Paul Miller commented on the vast difference between the evolution of hi-fi and AV. His point was, in a nutshell, that while a set of 20-year-old loudspeakers could still perform admirably in a modern hi-fi system, no one would want a 20-year-old TV or projector anywhere near their home cinema.

Through hi-def and 4K resolutions, new formats and the adoption of HDR, our hobby is certainly a lot different than it was two decades ago. But it still needs help to sell itself. And at the Sound & Vision Show, while I heard a lot of great sounds, I didn't see a lot of premium pictures – even though I did see a lot of premium TVs.

The problem (for me, anyway) was motion-smoothing. I didn't keep an exact tally, nor note down the offending exhibitors, but the majority of demonstrations incorporating some sort of display did so with motion-massaging technology in play.

This means that for all the sterling surround sound experiences on offer (which always seemed to be crammed with eager punters), they were accompanied by **visuals that looked as cinematic as an episode of Holby City**. There were some fine 4K and hi-def TVs on duty, but they were hobbled from the get-go.

Eradicating the *Dancing on Ice* vibe is a five-second process requiring nothing more than the TV's remote control, and your finger. So at first I wondered why no one had bothered to do it. And then I wondered whether the problem is not the TV tech, but me.

Frame interpolation/motion smoothing is something I notice immediately. I'd go as far as

saying it makes my skin crawl. But maybe I'm the odd one out, and in a room of twenty people watching clips from *Guardians of the Galaxy*, I'm the only one wondering why Chris Pratt looks funny.

Sure enough, the week after Sound & Vision I was at a friend's house, where a Samsung TV was set up to make everything look routinely horrid, and they didn't care a jot.

Modern frame interpolation systems are smarter than ever, and user customisation is offered. My TV reviewing compadres insist I should give the technology a whirl. But I'm still yet to find one system that doesn't occasionally throw up something so obviously fake and concocted on the fly that all my suspension of disbelief (and disbelief can take some serious suspending with the sort of movies I favour) is shattered. Sure, it works okay with sports broadcasts, but that's not much of a selling point.

Somewhere, over the rainbow

Maybe the negative effect of motion smoothing is like the rainbow effect with single-chip DLP projectors, and some people just don't see it. I'm susceptible to rainbows (a visit to Optoma's demo suite at Sound & Vision hammered that home), and even used to get rainbow 'fringing' (fleetingly) with my plasma TV. Perhaps my eyes and brain really are way off.

If that's the case, then I'll shut up and let AV brands continue to run their demonstrations how they see fit. On the other hand, if any prospective clients are also turned off by ropey, soap-operatic visuals that immediately scrub away the 'cinema' part of home cinema, then anyone is welcome to borrow my finger ■

*Are you a fan of motion smoothing technology?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Mark Craven has discovered there was another *Casualty* spin-off called *HolbyBlue*. He's now waiting for the *Holby Cinematic Universe*





Film Fanatic

Anton van Beek loves the idea of revisiting his favourite TV shows on Blu-ray, so why do some of the major Hollywood distributors have to make it so difficult?

CALL ME CRAZY if you like, but when it comes to owning a new TV series so I can watch it whenever I want, I refuse to spend my money on a version that looks worse than it did when it was broadcast. So if I have already enjoyed a series in hi-def on TV, then nothing could ever convince me to purchase that show on DVD. I've spent considerable time and money putting my AV system together and ensuring that it delivers an audio-visual experience to savour. Having done all that, I don't like being forced to make performance compromises.

Also, **I'm a bit of an old fuddy-duddy when it comes to newfangled VOD services**, and would rather spend my cash on something physical – rather than something intangible that could be taken away from me at any time due to licenses expiring, and disagreements between studios and VOD platforms.

This means I always look to own TV series on Blu-ray, something that is becoming harder and harder to do due to a constant slowdown in the number (and type) of TV shows being released on the disc format.

This fact was driven home recently by the fairly last-minute announcement (only a month ahead of its on-sale date) that Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment UK was bypassing Blu-ray and only releasing the critically-acclaimed *The Handmaid's Tale: The Complete First Season* on DVD. This was one of my favourite TV dramas of 2017, and I had been eagerly awaiting the chance to add it to my Blu-ray library. But clearly Fox UK had other ideas.

This is nothing new for Fox, which has a patchy history with releasing TV shows on Blu-ray. But whereas the likes of *Modern Family*, *Fargo*, *Sleepy Hollow* and *The Strain* were all given at least an initial Blu-ray release and then switched to DVD-only when

those BD sales presumably fell short of expectations, *The Handmaid's Tale* didn't even get a chance to show what it could do. Making matters worse is that Fox has released the show on Blu-ray in the US, so this is a decision aimed purely at the UK/European market.

And *The Handmaid's Tale* is a rather unfortunate title to fall foul of this strategy. Reports circulated a few years back about statements on social media from Fox in the US concerning it abandoning TV on Blu-ray. The gist being that unless the title was something it believed would appeal to the biggest Blu-ray demographic (apparently men aged between 30 and 60), it had little interest in issuing a hi-def release. If this thinking has played a part in the decision made here, am I the only person who sees the irony in a drama about the subjugation of women by a controlling patriarchy being denied a BD release because it isn't aimed mainly at a male audience?

License to thrill?

So what's the solution? In the case of this particular title, UK fans can import a Blu-ray from another territory. However, even when the same studio is releasing a title in different territories, region-locking can still be an issue – just one more reason why you should possibly invest in a multi-region deck.

Another idea is that studios need to make more of their new TV shows available for license to independent labels (at reasonable costs). After all, if one UK indie can license the 1990 film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* for release on Blu-ray (see p106), I bet another could see the value in doing the same with the far superior TV series ■

Which TV shows would you love to see released on Blu-ray? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

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In The Mix

After a recent encounter with an old-school hi-fi enthusiast, **Jon Thompson** reckons he has a case for Mulder and Scully – and some fond memories of an F1 racing flick

I RETURNED FROM the Sound & Vision show excited by what I found, although not in the way I was expecting. Despite all the new tech on display, I was struck by something so retro it's almost funny. You see, it seems reel-to-reel, quarter-inch tape machines are the hot thing to have to listen to music these days.

Is it the new vinyl (even though it's not new)? One punter told me he had paid £300 for a third-generation copy of the studio master of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, and travelled several thousand miles to get it! I don't blame him, though.

Sweet 16mm

It's all about getting closer to 'the truth'. For instance, my *HCC* colleague Martin Dew is obsessed with Super 8 and 16mm films. He asked me why on some such prints the black levels were so good – solid and rich, and far better than any digital presentation. The answer is that film is an amazing format that still we have not managed to recreate digitally. Its black level can have a more natural gradual tone. Watch a classic movie on film and it's closer to the original intent.

In the pure numbers game, more is better. Marketing people love numbers. 8K is the big topic this year. It's digital, it has more pixels, it's a bigger number than ever. It's more accurate, isn't it? Well, sort of. It's repeatable in its accuracy, that's all. It's repeatable like a microwave meal is. Every one made is technically correct, but lacking the soul and flavour of the picture on the box.

Do we need 8K? Of course not, but all hardware manufacturers will try and get you to drink the Kool-Aid. Will an actual movie improve? Will 8K fix the poor scripts and reboots that are flooding the cinema world and bringing it to its knees? No. It will

just bring even more confusion and poor-quality images that look nothing like the original.

I am not trying to be anti-digital, but must stress that it's not the only way. We should not ignore and discount other methods. This is why a small group of hi-fi enthusiasts are starting a quiet revolution by trying to be as pure as possible. £300 for a third-generation reel-to-reel tape seems a lot, as it's thirty times the cost of the CD. Yet I recently spent time testing a \$100,000 SACD player, and was told they are selling well. People are prepared to spend big in the pursuit of happiness. (Nobody makes a £100,000 UHD Blu-ray player, of course. Possibly because when Panasonic announces a deck at £1,000, the whole of Twitter has a meltdown...).

I'm lucky in that I get to hear many films at the mix stage, which to me is the truth. The final mix is where a small group of people sign off on what it is and what will filter down to all formats. I remember being in the final mix for Ron Howard's movie *Rush* (pictured), and hearing the playback of the opening scene was like nothing I've heard since. When the car engines fired up I actually felt like I was sitting in the middle of the grid. To me, that is the truth of that soundtrack. It was true cinema. **The image speaks, sound amplifies** – as the Free Cinema manifesto declared. Now it's a memory of an experience I can never have again.

In a world where the truth is a scarce commodity, I can understand why people are going to any length to find it. An obsession with convenience has put us in this state. If you're reading this magazine you are likely interested in achieving this nirvana (unless you just found *HCC* in someone's bathroom). I applaud you. Don't stop looking. The truth is out there... ■

Has your AV passion led you to spend big on a piece of software? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

When he's not in his screening room, **Jon Thompson** tweets about Hollywood gossip, movie-making and digital mastering at [@johnnyfocal](https://twitter.com/johnnyfocal)



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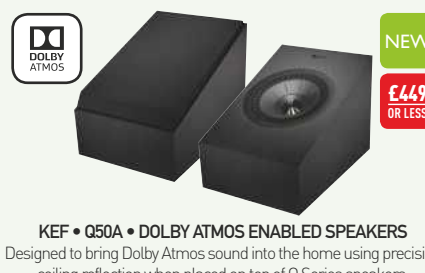
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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current tech? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **Team HCC** is here to help

A happy HDR home

After reading your letter answer [*Upgrade my Pana TV?*, *Feedback*, HCC #280] I tried to upgrade our TV for my husband as a New Year's present.

I dialled the number for Head Office in Berkshire, and spoke to customer services (in Romania). I was sent the info which letter-writer Andrew describes as gobbledygook, which I found quite straightforward.

I purchased the USB stick, and made sure it could hold the amount of data required (although no one could tell me how much this was). However, it didn't work. From December 2017 until February 5, 2018 I spoke to Panasonic 18 times. I was asked to reset my TV to factory settings, I was informed to change the systems of the HDMI channels, and I was informed that there was no one available to talk to me within the UK.

On February 5 I demanded to speak to someone in the UK. I was put through to a very nice gentleman from the Technical Team and he explained what I needed to do. Again I explained I had followed the directions sent to me on numerous occasions; I also explained that the download only worked on a Windows PC and not a Mac (he still thinks it should work



Panasonic has an HDR update for its 2015 CX802

on a Mac). I then mentioned the download was 131.4MB, and he explained it should be around 540MB. So I asked that he download it and send me the USB stick. I received it at 10am the next morning and it took all of five minutes to upgrade my Panasonic TV to HDR.

My husband is now watching his new 4K HDR Blu-rays, which is driving me mad as he

keeps asking if I can see the difference in the colour and picture. Fantastic.

Wendy Hiley

Mark Craven replies: Glad we (and more obviously Panasonic) could be of help, Wendy, and that your husband is enjoying the upgrade

We're guilty, your honour

As a long-standing subscriber to HCC, I should like to compliment you for the excellent overall quality of your reviews and technical information. However, I would like to correct a factual error in your review of *Murder on the Orient Express* [*Playback*, HCC #283].

Your opening sentence stated 'Having just wrapped up a case in Istanbul, Belgian detective Hercule Poirot embarks on a trip back to London on the lavish Orient Express.' However, the film's opening scene had a title clearly stating 'Jerusalem, the Western Wall, 1934', in which Poirot was summoned to solve the mystery of a theft of a holy relic from the Church of the Nativity. Once the [redacted] had been arrested based on Poirot's evidence, he then took a boat from the port of Haifa to Istanbul, in order to catch the Orient Express to Calais...

David Lass

Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) somewhere in Europe...



on your TV – even if he's 'driving you mad'. This is one of the perils of living with an AV-Holic unfortunately. It's not enough for us to marvel at the differences between one format and another – we want to make sure everyone else appreciates it too...

Netflix can force cinemas to up their game

I was interested to read Romualds Pizans' letter on big-budget special effects movies like *Bright* skipping cinemas and heading straight to Netflix [*Feedback*, HCC #283]. I too have been worried about the streaming service undermining cinema distribution and steadily wearing down the communal experience of going to the cinema with friends and family.

However, when Netflix's Reed Hastings was asked at Code Conference 2017 about his position on Netflix's theatrical prospects, he made a pertinent point: most of the new 4K HDR TVs (he used an LG OLED as an example) way surpass the image quality the average movie viewer could expect to see in a cinema these days.

This comment resonated with me. I am an avid cinemagoer, but over the past seven years (since the widespread switch to digital projection) I have become increasingly disenchanted with the cinema experience due to the terrible quality of projection in the big cinema chains. When large, flagship cinemas and prime venues such as the Cineworld Leicester Square and Vue Westfields Stratford City regularly project films with appalling brightness and contrast, Reed Hastings' vision of a home-based theatrical future becomes tempting.

I don't want this to happen and I would be devastated if everything migrated off the cinema screens. But something needs to happen, and if this is the disruption that will force cinema chains to finally listen to consumers, then so be it. Fingers crossed, it will eventually fan the flames of improvement in theatrical exhibition rather than lead to the shutting down of multiplexes. *Barnaby Walter*

Mark Craven replies: That's an interesting counter-argument to the 'Netflix is threatening cinema' view, Barnaby. To counter your counter-argument, if I may, I've actually been impressed by some recent cinema experiences, and think that the big chains are already looking to improve – no doubt to stay appealing in the face of the binge-watch revolution.

Yet Reed Hastings is right to highlight the growing capabilities of premium screens (even though he will know that Netflix's customer base views its shows on anything from largescreen TVs to handheld devices and laptops). The danger for cinema chains is

★ Star Letter...

My soundbar system rules

So here it is. After many years of being a hi-fi obsessive (I even spent six years working in a Linn/Naim dealership), and progressing from that love to a full home cinema system, I have finally opted for convenience!

I have over the years had/used/loved some of the best audio separates reasonable money could buy, including the aforementioned Linn and Naim equipment and many highly regarded AVR and speaker packages. They did, though, all share one common malady; they required a bit of patience (and button pressing) to get up and running when we wanted to settle down to enjoy a night's entertainment. I didn't go the Harmony remote route, but I did dabble over the years (why are these things so damn complicated?).

In my last system I had the highly reviewed and recommended Sony STR-DN1080. But what the reviews don't tell you apart from the great sound quality is how unspeakably slow the unit is to operate. So I took a decision. I needed something quicker. Something of today, not of the last decade.

So seven speakers and multiple subs would clear away from the lounge and I would embrace the future. Having bought an Alexa speaker and some Wi-Fi light bulbs at Christmas I determined the future of home audio did not have to contain any wires and should perform all duties required quickly and effortlessly. What on earth should I purchase that would give me both good sound and the convenience we craved?

Research narrowed it down to Sonos and Samsung. Sonos is the master on no wires, looks good, sounds good, but is, shall we say, a little ambitious on pricing. Samsung has also received great reviews for its top-flight soundbars and wireless speaker systems, so it was a duel.

In a shop there was nothing really to choose between them. The Sonos gear

looks far better to my eyes, but I discovered that the given RRP's (roughly the same) didn't tell the whole story.

In the case of Samsung's HW-MS650 soundbar and excellent R6 speaker, I was able to buy them at a reduced fee.

They may have been discontinued, I don't know, but frankly I did not care. Purchase made, items acquired, setup a breeze, system installed.

How does it sound? Very good. The soundbar obviously doesn't go anywhere near as deep as the two subs I was using but it does really well for what it is. Cosmetically it all looks cool and as I have a top-end Samsung TV purchased last year it all integrates and works well.

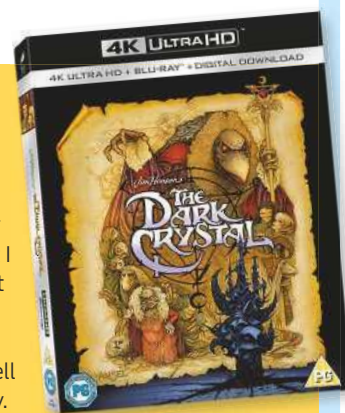
The key thing is in the last sentence. It just works, seamless and convenient and without too many compromises on sound.

I have a cupboard full of Blu-rays and DVDs. I used to purchase them weekly. Last year I didn't buy one. I now stream everything as it's convenient and fast. Shouldn't your audio gear match?

Keith

Mark Craven replies: Thanks for the letter Keith, and congratulations on your new setup – sounds like you got yourself a good deal. Ease of use and convenience are, of course, massively important – have any other HCC readers packed away a complex speaker/receiver setup in favour of something slicker, smaller and simpler to operate? We'd love to hear from you...

Star letter-writer Keith grabs *The Dark Crystal: Anniversary Edition* on Ultra HD Blu-ray, courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. Jim Henson's visually spectacular 1982 fantasy epic has been fully restored in 4K from the original camera negative and is joined on Ultra HD Blu-ray by a remixed Dolby Atmos soundtrack. An *Anniversary Edition* Blu-ray, based on the 4K restoration, is also available.



that consumers can update their home setup overnight, whereas rolling out new technology across a multitude of multiplexes is a slow, complicated and costly procedure.

No wirecutting in my house!

Sir Cliff once said, 'I like small speakers, I like tall speakers. If they've music, they're wired for sound'. Although as Mark Craven pointed out in *Digital Copy*, HCC #282, these days that ain't necessarily so!

I have been clinging onto my wired multichannel setup, while all around me I see a deluge of wireless or at the very least 'minimally' wired solutions, such as soundbars. These are owned by many of my friends and the millennials I work with, who balk at the thought of a cable that has nothing other than the mains supply dangling off the end of it.

Truthfully though, when exposed to my friends' minimalist affairs, I've always

preferred the sound of my discrete multichannel setup. However, what the future really shows us (as it creeps up on a daily basis) is that convenience tends to win out.

I remember the furore over the next great audio format to come along. Would it be Super Audio CD or DVD-A? I dipped my toe into both waters but no one could have expected Mr. Jobs to come along and drop the Apple iPod into the equation at roughly the same time. Then, of course, everything seemed to go the way of MP3, so now you can fit 1,000 songs into your pocket.

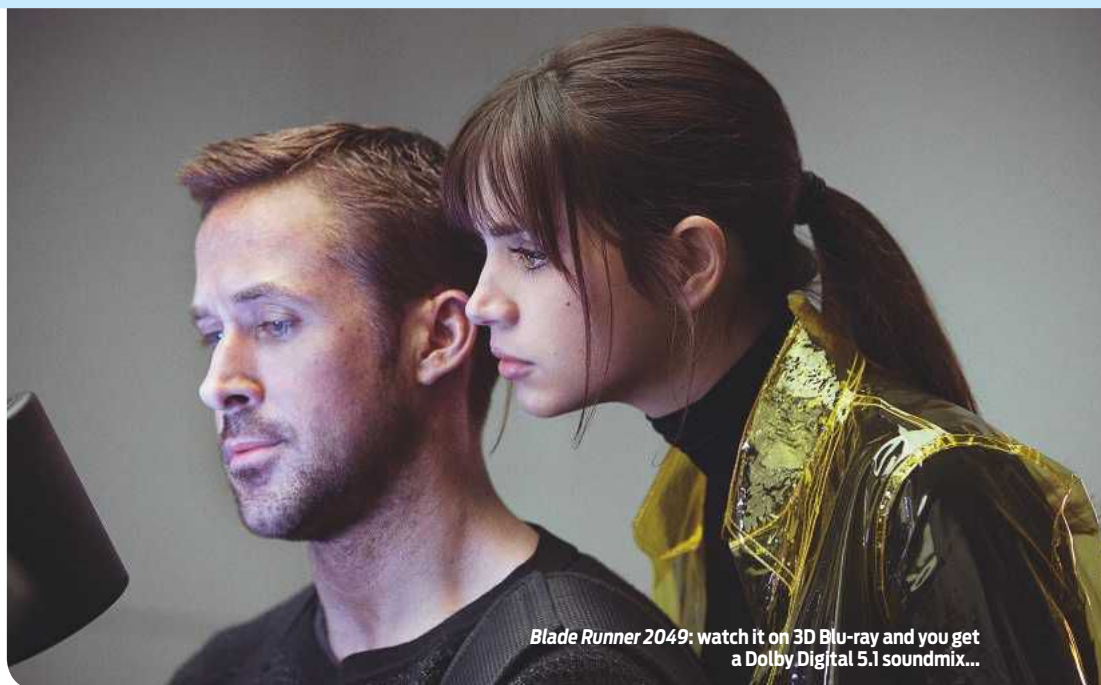
Streaming MP3 from my NAS or streaming from the likes of Amazon Music via Alexa is the mainstay of how I listen to music in the home these days. I am struggling to remember the last time I made a conscious effort to locate a CD, open the case and insert it in a disc player – other than to rip it to MP3. Which is ridiculous as many of us will have Blu-ray players and AVRs that would make a not too shabby a job of listening to CDs rather than compressed MP3 tracks.

So for me the last vestibule of traditional wired sound is my multichannel setup, which, of course, is wholly inconvenient in the environment of my lounge, as I am not fortunate enough to have a dedicated listening room. This has been challenging over the years mostly because whoever designs most UK lounges does not have home cinema in mind. In fact, in my 1990s home there still seemed to be 1930s design at work, where it was assumed that no one would own a TV, just a sideboard with a wireless set (in the 1930s, of course, wireless meant something else entirely).

Eventually the TV came along but again designers assumed that you would shove it into the corner as tightly as possible so that it couldn't be seen and wouldn't suddenly leap up and spoil everyone's conversation. My parents had friends that threw a blanket over the TV when it wasn't in use. That's how offended they were by its mere presence. Also in the corner is where you will find all the mains sockets (all both of them) and the RF outlet, because that's all you'll ever need.

Several years back after moving into my current home and squashing my 40in TV and multichannel setup sideways against a (rare) flat wall, in an oblong lounge that had a strangely offset bay window, stupidly placed doors and fireplace, it became very obvious that one half of the lounge was chock full of furniture (and people) and the other half wasn't.

So around six years ago, a decision was made to acquire new AV furniture and upgrade my TV to 50in and move everything 'lengthwise'. This took three days, the help of my dearly departed Dad, yards of quality speaker, satellite and RF cable that didn't bend around corners, a great deal of swearing and



Blade Runner 2049: watch it on 3D Blu-ray and you get a Dolby Digital 5.1 soundmix...

myself putting my back out, quite seriously in fact. You can see why at this point a soundbar or going wireless looked very appealing.

However the results were worth it! My 7.1 setup had room to breathe and swell and fill the room – and my 50in TV has now grown to 65in. Unfortunately my good lady often looks back at the cramped space we shared before with fondness, saying it was 'cosy' and using fluffy words to that effect and 'how about I move it all back again?'. In these instances I have to say, 'Fine, I'll get rid of the speaker package and AVR and make do with a soundbar,' and then I push out my bottom lip. This has the desired effect of prompting my dear wife to remind me how much I love my multichannel wired setup. And, yes, I do love it. So it's staying where it is.

I intend to stay wired for sound for the foreseeable future. Like Sir Cliff.
Ian Forster

Richard Stevenson replies: Fireplaces are a nightmare aren't they? In most UK lounges, the only large, unwindowed wall has a fireplace bang in the middle of it. This means it's not uncommon to find living room AV setups squished into configurations that give them little chance to work their best.

You've done the right thing by rearranging your system and giving it 'room to breathe'. Don't countenance the idea of going back!

Give 3D fans better sonics
I must agree with the comments made by Alan Russell in Feedback, HCC #282.

Those in pursuit of perfection will no doubt disagree, but with a few notable exceptions, the uplift in visual quality isn't usually sufficient to warrant the high prices of UHD discs.

My family and friends are always immediately impressed with the AV quality of my home cinema setup whenever I screen a Full HD movie in 2D. However, when I slip in

a UHD/HDR disc, it generally passes without further comment; my audience doesn't perceive any additional wow factor. But the big WOW! comes when I screen a 3D movie with a Dolby Atmos soundtrack; my audience (even regular cinema-goers) are simply blown away. The visual quality of 3D may not be as good technically as the UHD image, but the increase in visual impact is far more obvious.

A 3D title just cries out to be partnered with the most immersive soundmix available – this ought to be a no-brainer. It is very disappointing therefore that so many 3D releases are being issued with inferior soundtracks compared with their UHD counterparts. I could accept this if it were down to technical issues, but this is simply down to the marketing whims of the distributors. It makes my blood boil! Are the studio bosses so out of touch with the market they serve? Or are they only too aware that the visual impact alone is not enough to justify the high cost of UHD discs? And why do they appear to be so unwilling to let the public decide by evening out the playing field?
Steve Fyles

Anton van Beek replies: Currently it seems Atmos and 3D BD are like Clark Kent and Superman – you never find both in the room at the same time. As I wrote last month [*Film Fanatic*], Sony Pictures is a serial offender (even putting a lossy Dolby Digital 5.1 mix on the *Blade Runner 2049* 3D BD) and Warner Bros. is following suit. As it's a hot topic amongst dedicated film fans, maybe studios will actually take notice. Maybe ■

Contact us...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Suite 25, Eden House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com

Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

WIN! Great Blu-rays up for grabs...

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance to win

Vestron Collector's Series Blu-rays – Wave 2

Lionsgate UK recently unleashed the cult horror favourites *The Lair of the White Worm*, *The Gate* and *Wishmaster* as part of its Vestron Collector's Series Blu-ray range. To celebrate, we have five sets of the three BDs up for grabs – and to be in with a chance of winning simply answer the following question correctly...

Question:

Which British filmmaker directed *The Lair of the White Worm*?

Answer:

- A) Alex Cox B) Peter Greenaway
C) Ken Russell

Email your answer with 'Vestron Wave 2' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



24 Hours to Live

Ethan Hawke stars in this action-thriller about an elite assassin who is killed on the job... only to be brought back to life for one last mission.

24 Hours to Live is available now on Digital Download, followed by DVD and Blu-ray on March 26. Thanks to Lionsgate UK, we have five Blu-rays to give away!

Question:

Ethan Hawke played a pimp in which 2017 science-fiction film?

Answer:

- A) *The Last Jedi* B) *Blade Runner 2049*
C) *Valerian and the City of 1,000 Planets*
Email your answer with '24 Hours to Live' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



Britannia: Season 1

Experience the Roman invasion of Britain with this mythical TV drama starring Kelly Reilly, David Morrissey and Mackenzie Crook.

Britannia: Season 1 is available on Digital Download, DVD and Blu-ray from March 26, courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment – and we have five Blu-rays up for grabs!

Question:

The Roman invasion of Britannia in A.D. 43 began under which Emperor?

Answer:

- A) Emperor Claudius B) Emperor Tiberius
C) Darth Sideous

Email your answer with 'Britannia' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



Justice League

Justice League is out now on Digital Download and available on 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray™, Blu-ray™ 3D, Blu-ray™ and DVD from March 26. A Steelbook is also available exclusively with HMV.

Thanks to Warner Bros. Home Entertainment we've got five copies of the *Justice League* Blu-ray™ to be won!

Question:

True or false: *Justice League* was filmed on locations in the UK and Iceland?

Answer:

- A) True B) False

Email your answer with 'Justice League' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!

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Certified: AV-Holic!

HCC reader **Keith** has combined a 7.1 KEF speaker system with an Epson projector and CinemaScope ratio screen to create his perfect movie-watching space



For Keith, a 2.35:1 screen was a must-have



Welcome to the AV-Holics Hall of Fame. Introduce yourself!

Hi, I'm Keith Arnold, aged 78 and I'm a retired Purchasing Agent from the Petro-

Chemical Industry. I was also a part-time music critic for Phillip Parr's now defunct *Laserdisc Review* magazine.

How long have you been into home cinema – and what was the first setup you had?

I've always been interested in the projected image and CinemaScope in particular. I started out as a nipper with a Mickey Mouse-type projector which must have bored my folks to tears. Over the years I came up through the ranks via Super 8,

VHS, Super VHS, Laserdisc, DVD and finally to Blu-ray.

When did you make the decision to set up your current cinema room?

A lack of space always prevented me from having my own dedicated cinema room but two years ago I had space available upstairs and transformed my spare room into this modest four seater mini-cinema.

The room measures 10.5ft wide and 14.5ft deep. The windows are permanently covered with a plastic black-out material. The 'Scope screen is 106in wide, which virtually stretches from wall-to-wall at one end of the room. With the chairs positioned about 10ft away from the screen this creates a very effective angle of viewing and stunning field of vision.





The cinema provides space for four film fans – although comfier chairs are on the shopping list

No 4K upgrade is planned, and our AV-Holic is happy with the upscaling talents of his Epson EH-TW9300



week, and as I'm retired it gets used during the day, too.

And what are your top 5 favourite films?

West Side Story, The Music Man, The Producers, Spartacus and Lawrence of Arabia.

Do you already have your eyes on more upgrades?

I'd like some more comfortable chairs, although I must admit that it's easy to fall asleep on the present ones!

I prefer to use BDs, and at present DVDs are almost impossible to project onto my large screen due to a lack of definition, so I'd like to investigate the possible purchase of a DVDO iScan Mini to upscale and allow acceptable viewing of DVDs.

Lastly, are you planning on upgrading to 4K?

At my time of life and having just reached the point where I've recently finished upgrading my favourite DVDs to BDs, I'm not intending to do a further upgrade to real 4K. My Epson PJ with its 4K up-rezzing suits my purpose very well ■

Did you do all the setup work here yourself?

Most of the installation was self-built. The only professional work was carried out on the projector by the supplier, Richard Bell of UK Home Cinemas.

What kit's in your system?

I have a Screenline Amleto projector screen (fixed-frame, 2.35:1) used with an Epson EH-TW9300.

My speakers are a KEF E305 system, with two additional surrounds for 7.1, and the receiver is a seven-channel Yamaha RX-V775. For Blu-ray discs I have an Oppo BDP-103D. I also have a Panasonic DMR-BWT720 for Blu-ray recording. Hi-def programmes recorded onto BD are superb (and cheap).

What was the last thing that you added to your setup?

The Epson EH-TW9300 projector, together with this larger screen, around one year ago.

And what's your favourite bit of kit?

The Epson projector – its picture is stunning.

What do friends and family think of the cinema room?

They're very impressed, and can't believe a home setup can be so good.

What discs do you use to show off the system?

It really depends on the audience I'm playing to. I tend to concentrate on CinemaScope films as the wall-to-wall picture really impresses. For standard BD films I usually go for *Ronin* (for the exciting car chases) and for 3D I would usually go for *Kong: Skull Island*. If I'm demonstrating to any of my classical music friends I go for any of the BDs of live operas from Covent Garden or the Metropolitan Opera.

Does the setup get a lot of use?

I use the cinema about two or three nights a

Share your cinema system in the mag!

If you want to be in **HCC**, you'll need to send us some hi-res images of your cinema room. Here are a few tips...

1. Go big. Set your camera to take images at the largest possible size, and at the highest resolution. Don't worry about cropping or resizing – we will make them print-ready.
2. Get in focus. Make sure your photos are as sharp and clear as possible. If you have one, use a tripod, or place your camera on a flat, steady surface and take pictures on a delay. The sharper they are, the bigger we can print them.
3. Let some light in. While we tend to watch

- movies in the dark, our cinema systems look their best when they are lit. If you can shoot with natural daylight, do so. If your room doesn't get a lot of light (a garage conversion, for instance) then switch on whatever lights are fitted. Avoid using flash wherever possible.
4. Be thorough. Send photos of as much of the room as possible. Images of both the front and back of the room, the kit rack, speakers, seating, disc shelf, movie poster art... The more the merrier.

5. Don't be shy. Send a picture of yourself!
6. Show us more. Got pictures of your room before it was a cinema? Or snaps of work being done? We love to see these, too.

Now what?

Email your images to **letters@homecinemachoice.com** with the subject heading 'AV-Holic', and provide your answers to the questions above – then we'll be in touch!

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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **COCO** Is Pixar's latest worth importing from the US on Ultra HD Blu-ray? **ONLY THE BRAVE** True-life drama lights up your home cinema in HD **THE DARK CRYSTAL** Jim Henson's freaky fantasy receives a 4K makeover **DADDY'S HOME 2** Do more daddies make for more laughs? **CASABLANCA** Play it again on Blu-ray & MORE!

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

A rocking good time

Thor: Ragnarok → Walt Disney → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD

Marvel's God of Thunder takes a trip across the universe in this '80s-inspired action-comedy from Kiwi director Taika Waititi. Find out if *Thor: Ragnarok* is a home cinema superhero when we take the film's Ultra HD Blu-ray for a spin on p96...

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

Coco grossed more money in 19 days than Cars 3 managed in over five months!



Death reinvigorates Pixar

After a few hit-or-miss efforts the studio returns with one of its most magical movies to date



→ COCO: ULTIMATE COLLECTOR'S EDITION

Taking its cues from Mexico's colourful Day of the Dead tradition, *Coco* sees Pixar delivering yet another effortlessly superior computer-animated film that runs the gamut of human emotion without ever feeling forced or cloying. It's storyline and themes may be a little too sophisticated to hold the attention of young children – but that's arguably more of a strength than a weakness!

Picture: At least confused younger viewers have plenty of gorgeous visuals to coo at. *Coco*'s vision of the Land of the Dead is a sensational blend of colour, mountainous architecture and epic, imaginative vistas – all elevated to drool-inducing levels of beauty by the 2.40:1 Ultra HD transfer.

Applying a wider colour palette and high dynamic range to *Coco*'s stellar artwork and animation helps the 4K disc deliver a transformative enhancement over the normal Full HD Blu-ray. The image is elevated from just being easy on the eye to being outright irresistible, delivering a world so full of life, lustre and beauty that having to die to enter it feels like a bargain.

The film's trio of 'showtime' set pieces – Miguel's singing contest with Hector, Ernesto's final performance in the land of the living, and his climactic grand show in the Land Of The Dead look especially

breathtaking. But there are plenty of other moments in between that leave the 1080p encode seeming flat and lifeless by comparison.

The 4K transfer's detail levels aren't reference grade. They still, though, offer some improvement over the 1080p incarnation, particularly during the close-ups of the 'bone tattoos' and tattered clothing sported by the Land of the Dead characters.

Audio: *Coco*'s beautiful 4K HDR visuals aren't joined by a particularly inspiring audio track. Considering it's a Dolby Atmos mix of a cinematic soundtrack that's been nominated for multiple awards, we found it rather lifeless and lacking in detail.

There's precious little use of ambient or spot effects, and even the all-important music isn't mixed as aggressively for a surround experience as we'd have expected. Strange. Really the only time the mix comes to life is with the concert scenes – but even these are hardly demo-worthy.

Extras: *Coco* is backed up by a sizeable array of extras, including 10 featurettes that take in everything from the animation process to the voice cast and story development. They also include

coverage of the production team visiting families in Mexico to better understand the Day of the Dead.

Also well worth your time are the seven deleted scenes (cobbed together from storyboards and pre-viz animations) and an insightful filmmakers' commentary.



HCC VERDICT

Coco: Ultimate Collector's Edition

→ Walt Disney → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £34 (US import)

WE SAY: A beautifully told tale brought to often stunning life by a bright, colourful 4K picture.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

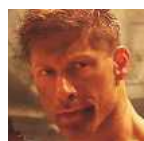
Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Kickboxer: Retaliation

Kaleidoscope → All-region BD
£16



This DTV sequel to the 2016 martial arts movie reboot *Kickboxer: Vengeance* is bigger and better in every regard.

Set one year after its predecessor, the film finds Alain Moussi's Kurt Sloan fighting for his life in a Thai prison, where he'll stay unless he agrees to a death-match with towering man-monster Mongkut (Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson). And so the scene is set for more high-octane martial arts action, with Jean-Claude Van Damme, Mike Tyson and Christopher Lambert joining the fun. Shot digitally, the film looks great in HD, while impactful DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics add plenty of power to the fight scenes.



Re:Born

Eureka → Region B BD & R2 DVD
£13



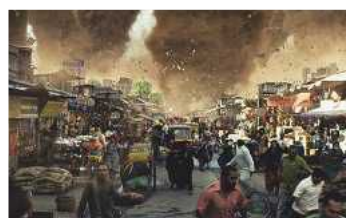
If the idea of watching an army of anonymous soldiers being stabbed and slashed with knives for the best part of an

hour doesn't appeal to you, then you should steer well clear of this Japanese action flick. For the rest of us, however, *Re:Born* is cinematic nirvana, with its 140-minute running time split equally between brooding build-up and non-stop martial arts mayhem. This UK BD doesn't offer much in the way of extras (just a couple of trailers and a very short filmmakers' intro video), but scores well with its desaturated 2.40:1 encode and bone-crunching DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio.



Geostorm

Warner Bros. → All-region BD
£25



Roland Emmerich's frequent partner in crime Dean Devlin makes his directorial debut with this supremely silly, yet surprisingly dull disaster flick dealing with weaponised

weather control satellites. As bad as *Geostorm* may be, it does at least deliver superbly sharp 1080p visuals and a bombastic DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix on Blu-ray – although if you're the sort of film that drops a passenger jet on the streets of Rio De Janeiro, is it really too much to hope for a Dolby Atmos mix? Despite the promise of 'action-packed special features' on the slipcase, all you actually get are three perfunctory *Making of...* featurettes.



Hotshots shine on Blu-ray

True story heats up your home cinema with its superb picture and audio

→ ONLY THE BRAVE

Despite the drama and heroism inherent in their jobs and the way that stories about them could translate into thrilling cinematic spectacle, it's surprising that there haven't been more films about firefighters.

Like *Ladder 49* before it, director Joseph (Tron: Legacy) Kosinski's latest film is based on a true story. However, rather than focus on traditional inner city firefighters, *Only the Brave* is about a hotshot crew – a team specifically put together to battle wildfires.

The fact that the film is based on the true story of the Granite Mountain Hotshots ensures that some viewers will know just where the narrative is heading; even those who don't can probably make a pretty good guess. However, it's not the story's ending that matters here, but rather the journey we take with the firefighters, brought convincingly to the screen by a terrific ensemble cast including the likes of Josh Brolin, Miles Teller and Taylor Kitsch.

Picture: Seeing as it was shot in 4K and finished as a 4K Digital Intermediate, it's somewhat disappointing that there's no Ultra HD Blu-ray release of *Only the Brave* on the cards right now. Thankfully, the superb quality of this 1080p incarnation's 2.40:1 encode makes this pill a little easier to swallow.

Colour saturation is excellent (particularly in the vibrant reds and yellows that dominate the fires), while black levels are rock solid. Detailing is also first-rate, giving the Full HD image a believable sense of texture and highlighting every pore and mark on the cast members' faces during close-ups.

Audio: The Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is arguably just as impressive as its picture quality, making



Battling wildfires in Arizona

aggressive and expansive use of the full soundstage throughout the film, and oozing fidelity. Indeed, the only reason we've held back from giving it full marks is that *Only the Brave* was mixed in Dolby Atmos for its theatrical release – maybe because it's a Sony Pictures release in the US means a domestic Atmos mix wasn't made available to overseas licensees (as Sony doesn't include them on its 1080p discs).

Extras: The main extra feature here is a commentary track from Joseph Kosinski and leading man Josh Brolin, but Lionsgate's Blu-ray also includes two deleted scenes, a music video (with its own behind-the-scenes piece) and a trio of featurettes all around eight minutes long. The best of these (*Honoring the Heroes: The True Stories*) looks at the true events that inspired the story and how the filmmakers overcame local resistance to the idea of making the movie.



HCC VERDICT

Only the Brave

→ Lionsgate → Region B BD
→ £25

WE SAY: A powerful and moving true-life drama that delivers superb AV performance on Blu-ray.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

A Hela good time?

Marvel's latest sequel will leave you in stitches – even if its Dolby Atmos soundtrack is no laughing matter...



→ THOR: RAGNAROK

If you're one of those people who take your Marvel superheroes a bit too seriously, you might not like *Thor: Ragnarok*.

You see, director Taika (*What We Do in the Shadows*) Waititi takes a 100 per cent irreverent approach to the source material, gleefully lampooning every character and comic book trope from the first frames to the last. If you're sniffy about 'maintaining a certain tone' across the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or staying true to how certain characters are portrayed in the original comic books, you might find *Thor: Ragnarok*'s endless stream of laugh-out-loud gags borderline blasphemous.

For most people, though, the very stuff some fans might not like makes *Thor: Ragnarok* the most flat-out entertaining Marvel film yet. It gets close to even outdoing *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 2* for visual imagination and 'broad' humour – and that it does this within the relatively serious world of Thor, Loki, Odin and new villain Hela (portrayed with gleeful charisma by Cate Blanchett) just makes the gags all the funnier. **Picture:** While *Thor: Ragnarok*'s 4K transfer delivers a worthwhile improvement on the 1080p Blu-ray that ships alongside it, it's certainly not a best-in-class effort.

For starters, detail levels are only slightly improved over the HD picture. There's a better sense of texture in clothing and hair during close-ups, and a slightly more defined sense of interior space. Some largescale shots, though – especially those of Asgard – actually look a little soft. And hardly ever do you get that snap associated with the crispest, cleanest transfers.

This may well be down to the 4K presentation being derived from a mere 2K digital master. But we've seen other 2K upscales perform better.

It falls to the 4K disc's addition of HDR and wide colour gamut information to save the day. The brightness floor of pretty much the entire film is aggressively raised, making exteriors feel more natural and lifelike, and enhancing the punch and spectacle of the consistently colourful environments.

The colour palette doesn't always seem to be pushed quite as high as the brightness, leading to the occasional washed-out hue. But it's certainly strong enough to join with the HDR in delivering just the sort of flamboyant spectacle Waititi was surely aiming for.

Audio: Having had our ears assaulted – in a good way – by *Thor: Ragnarok* at the cinema, the Dolby



Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson) bolsters Marvel's roster of female heroes



Atmos soundtrack included on Disney's UHD Blu-ray is a real disappointment.

At times the whole soundstage feels strangely compressed. You'll first notice this during the opening fight between Thor, Surtur and his minions/pet dragon. Accompanied – hilariously – by Led Zeppelin's *Immigrant Song*, you'd expect this blend of rock and butt-kicking to shake your foundations and push every speaker into overdrive. But it doesn't. Instead bass levels seem constrained, while treble details lack sparkle and punch. Even the mid-range sounds like it's being held back, as if in preparation for some sudden barnstorming expansion that never comes.

There's also surprisingly little use of subtle effects around the soundstage, and tellingly you

have to turn your amp much louder than normal to get even a satisfactory sense of heft from the film's many action scenes.

Whatever the reason behind this curious, er, mix up (the DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack on the 1080p platter suffers from similar issues), *Thor: Ragnarok* sadly joins *Avengers: Age of Ultron* as yet another Marvel movie suffering from problematic home audio. You'd think by this point that Disney would have got its production processes running smoothly.

Extras: The 1080p

Blu-ray accompanying the 4K disc provides plenty of fun extra features to spin once the movie has finished.

The undoubted highlight is a hilarious chat-track by Waititi in which he's far more likely to discuss the state of Surtur's teeth or reflect on how little he remembers the shoot than bother with the usual 'this is how we made this bit' stuff. Hollywood studios should seriously consider getting him in to do an alternative commentary on every film...

The same jokey approach is enjoyably on show with the handful of behind-the-scenes featurettes provided here, making them more watchable than most. Five deleted/extended scenes are enhanced by more of the same humour too, while being able to watch two of the film's biggest set pieces rendered as 8-bit video games is an unexpected treat.

Yet more enjoyable madness comes courtesy of a *Team Darryl* spoof documentary in which Jeff Goldblum's Grandmaster shares a flat with a (very) Average Joe on Earth.

The only disappointments are a shallow recap of 10 years of the MCU, and a gag reel that runs to just a couple of minutes.

With Loki, Hela and Surtur all on tap, *Thor: Ragnarok* isn't short of villains



HCC VERDICT

Thor: Ragnarok

→ Walt Disney → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: Marvel's latest is a riot of 4K HDR fun that's let down by an underpowered soundmix.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Is the latest Marvel movie a sight for Thor eyes for 3D film fans?



As with almost all of the previous Marvel Cinematic Universe films, *Thor: Ragnarok* was treated to a stereoscopic conversion for its cinema release – and that version is also available to own on 3D Blu-ray. So how does it hold up?

Early impressions, it must be said, aren't great. The opening sequence, with Thor held captive by the demon Surtur, is just too murky to provide any real sense of depth in the imagery. Things pick up soon after, with Thor's subsequent return home to Asgard (Chapter 2) making the most of the uptick in brightness and clarity to create a convincing sense of volume within the frame. And sequences such as



Hela's destruction of Thor's hammer (Chapter 4) even show off some effective out-of-the-screen 3D effects.

The film's opening sequence does, however, offer the first occurrence of the biggest benefit of the 3D presentation: aspect ratio switching. *Thor: Ragnarok* features more resized IMAX shots than any previous

MCU film, and whenever the 3D platter's MVC encode switches from 2.40:1 to 1.85:1, it gives the stereoscopic imagery an even greater sense of scope and scale.

While the sharply-rendered, more colourful 1.85:1-framed set-pieces such as Thor's arrival on Sakaar (Chapter 5) and the spaceship battle (Chapter 13) are the clear highlights of the 3D conversion, even some darker sequences such as Hela battling the Valkyries (Chapter 12) gain greater clarity – and, therefore, more three-dimensionality – from the switch in ratios.

That said, there are ultimately too many drab, flat-looking scenes (particularly those set in Asgard after Hela's return) to make *Thor: Ragnarok* a standout 3D experience. But at its best, in those 1.85:1 moments, this 3D Blu-ray presentation is very impressive.

Arcade Action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. **Rik Henderson** checks out a videogame vying for time on your home cinema system...



Shadow of the Colossus

Sony Interactive Entertainment → PS4 → £30

It is easy to groan when it comes to games remakes. Like movies, you can't help but feel that developers would be better served trying out new ideas rather than simply rehashing a former great – often with less than stellar results.

However, if proof was ever needed that there is a space for a refresh of a former-generation videogame, this new PS4 edition of *Shadow of the Colossus* is it. More than just a flag-bearer for how an older title can be given enough love and care to provide a decent upgrade, it also stands head and shoulders with any other 'triple-A' PS4 title you may care to mention.

If you haven't played it before, *Shadow of the Colossus* was first released on the PS2 in 2005 and sported chunky, pixelated graphics to match. The game saw players fighting 16 increasingly difficult behemoths across an open-world landscape. The awe at the time was mainly for the game's gigantic Colossi, and the puzzles you had to solve to defeat them. It is telling to note that the same sense of awe remains today, even when faced with equally bombastic rivals such as *Monster Hunter: World* (reviewed last issue).

Shadow of the Colossus has been given an incredible graphical makeover, up to 4K on the PS4 Pro, with the fur and detail on each beast rendered with pin-sharp clarity. But the update doesn't stop there. Gameplay has been tweaked too, with controls better suiting the new DualShock 4 controller. Your in-game horse is also easier to ride this time around, so rather than fighting game mechanics you can now concentrate on battling each beast instead.

While it plays a touch better and there are improvements here and there, the game is still the same *Shadow of the Colossus* previous generations of gamers know and love. The soundtrack helps make sure of that, with the cinematic score best listened to through your surround sound system.

Indeed, sometimes it's the moments spent between fights, when exploring the large game world, that you feel most engrossed in the game. The visual and audio design both lend a haunting yet beautiful ambience that few more recent games can match.

That's why you remake an old game – to help a new audience share its majesty. If all re-releases were given as much respect as this one, we'd wager that most people would happily see other catalogue titles given a new lease of life.



Happy Death Day

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25



A feel-good fright film sounds like something of an oxymoron. However, it's the best way of summing up this fun mix of horror and humour that plays out like the *Groundhog Day* of

slasher films, as a college student keeps reliving the day she is murdered over and over again and tries to find out whodunnit. This smartly executed flick arrives on Blu-ray with a colourful 2.40:1 1080p encode (albeit one that is prone to noise in darker scenes), a dynamic DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack and a handful of extras (including a, thankfully scrapped, alternate ending).



The Deuce: The Complete First Season

HBO → All-region BD
£35



The Wire creator David Simon and regular collaborator George Pelecanos turn their eyes to the seedy underbelly of early 1970s New York in this fascinating drama about the streetwalkers

working around Times Square and the rise of the porn industry. As the Blu-ray extras demonstrate, the makers of *The Deuce* worked hard at recreating the look of '70s New York and that carries over into the show's general aesthetic. Gritty yet colourful, the eight 1080p encodes are richly textured and beautifully saturated, supported by atmospheric DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes. Extras include two insightful chat-tracks.



The Dark Tower [4K]

Sony Pictures → Ultra HD Blu-ray &
All-region BD → £30



This loose adaptation of Stephen King's *Dark Tower* novels is mid-budget schlock masquerading as something bigger. Idris Elba and Matthew McConaughey are hero and villain respectively of fantasy-land Mid-World; Tom Taylor the New York City boy pulled into their conflict. Despite the acting talent, this is a slap-dash affair, with lazy dialogue and garbled plotting. This 4K release dazzles, however, with a supremely crisp 2.40:1 picture (Dolby Vision/HDR10). Dolby Atmos sonics and a smattering of extras complete a hit-and-miss package.



Kira is voiced by Lisa Maxwell, who would go on to star in *The Bill* and *Hollyoaks*



Not so dark any more...

New 4K restoration adds lustre to this '80s fantasy film, but grain-haters should look away

4K
ULTRA
HD

→ THE DARK CRYSTAL: ANNIVERSARY EDITION

1982's *The Dark Crystal* is arguably puppet master Jim Henson's purest film, at least in the sense that it ditches human actors in favour of an all-puppet ensemble. This enables Henson and collaborator Frank Oz to create their most fantastical, other-worldly fantasy – and with it their most visceral and intense experience. There are scenes here that will have even quite grown-up kids hiding behind a cushion...

Picture: Image quality of this back-catalogue 4K release is somewhat hit and miss.

A definite hit is the amount of detail captured in the 2.40:1 picture. There are textures and minutiae visible in the puppets' 'skin' and clothing that haven't been seen before outside a cinema. The various sets also look more detailed and lovingly created.

The addition of HDR and enhanced colour also works well. At first we missed the darker, arguably more atmospheric look of the 1080p encode, but over time warmed to the extra light range, finding that it opened up the locations and revealed more detail. The main 'miss' is the way this

4K encode handles the native film grain. Possibly due to HDR grading making grain more obvious, it is extremely pronounced, even more so than you might be expecting from a 35mm-derived image.

Another issue is that the film's base colour tone fluctuates slightly during a couple of scenes.

Despite these foibles, the 4K transfer of *The Dark Crystal* is rather appealing.

Audio: A new Dolby Atmos mix produces a clean, dynamic and detailed experience across all the channels despite the film's 35-year vintage.

Some scenes, such as Jen's first meeting with Kira (Chapter 7), are a masterclass in surround mixing, the woodland setting sounding wonderfully alive and natural. Also, while this Atmos mix doesn't hit the peaks or depths of a modern action flick, the 'awoken' crystal shrieks emphatically during the film's climax (Chapter 16), and there are some potent LFE rumbles during the Garthim attacks.

Extras: Fittingly for such a cult classic, this Ultra HD Blu-ray package comes with a good set of extras. The only brand-new one, though, is a solid interview-based featurette (the 10-minute *The Myth, Magic and Henson Legacy*), where Jim Henson's daughter and the son of Conceptual Designer Brian Froud share tales of their parents' roles in the film.

Other legacy extras include a pleasingly insightful technical commentary by Froud; a picture-in-picture storyboard viewing mode; a fascinating recreation of 'Skeksis' scenes originally filmed using a made-up language; and an enjoyably in-depth hour-long *Making of...* documentary.



A 10-episode *Dark Crystal* prequel series is currently in production for Netflix



HCC VERDICT

The Dark Crystal: Anniversary Edition

→ Sony Pictures → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: A vibrant 4K presentation gives you a whole new appreciation of Jim Henson's incredible artistry.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



The boys are back in town...

...and they look positively wondrous in 4K HDR. Luckily, the film's not bad either

→ DADDY'S HOME 2

In the good-natured and occasionally very funny *Daddy's Home* (2015), step-father Brad (Will Ferrell) and freshly returned biological father Dusty (Mark Wahlberg) fought for the affections of children Dylan and Megan, and Brad's wife/Dusty's ex Sara, before becoming best buddies.

Daddy's Home 2 skips forward a couple of years to find them still getting along fine, but will their friendship survive when their own dads arrive on the scene, and the entire extended family decamps to a log cabin for Christmas?

The choice of John Lithgow as Will Ferrell's soppy father, and a surly Mel Gibson as Mark Wahlberg's, works well in this festive-tinged comedy, where frequent bouts of physical humour are underpinned by a story that manages to build on the premise of the original without feeling like a tired rehash (we're looking at you, *Meet the Fockers*). The expansion of the cast does leave some characters with less to do, and one or two sequences fall flat, but there are plenty of belly laughs here, plus an awesome, surprise cameo from an action movie fave...

Picture: Viewed in the default HDR10 (Paramount has also packed the disc with a Dolby Vision encode, not tested here), *Daddy's Home 2* surprises with superior visuals based around a crisp image and excellent use of HDR. This is a pristine, modern-looking picture (shot on digital cameras with – according to its IMDb technical entry – some 8K capture), with scads of detail and no picture foibles.

Colour saturation is also excellent. Festive jumpers and Winter coats look richly hued, while



This flick saw Mel Gibson win the Golden Raspberry for Worst Supporting Actor...

darker tones show subtle variations and some hi-viz jackets radiate searing luminosity. Meanwhile, one night-time sequence (involving copious fairy lights) is a fine showcase for HDR impact, with bright highlights ping-pong out of detailed shadow. This is first-rate stuff.

Audio: *Daddy's Home 2* carries a Dolby Atmos/TrueHD soundmix that isn't given a huge amount to work with, thanks to the rather down-to-earth nature of the source material, and there's a predominant LCR focus much of the time. That said, the movie's 'action' moments (usually involving something colliding with something else) are endowed with suitable bass energy, and the soundmix provides ambient immersion through FX placement.

Extras: Bonus bits here are the predictable mix of short, nonessential featurettes (one focusing on another of the film's oddball cameos), deleted scenes and a gag-reel. Nothing to get excited about.

HCC VERDICT

Daddy's Home 2

→ Paramount → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: Enjoyable festive flick that impresses with its image quality but is a Scrooge when it comes to extras.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

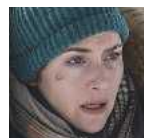
Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

The Mountain Between Us

Twentieth Century Fox → All-region BD £25



Kate Winslet and Idris Elba star in this mix of survival drama and date movie, with the pair playing the survivors of

a plane crash who grow closer while risking life and limb to make it back to civilisation. Sadly, despite a strong start, the film leans too heavily on romantic melodrama to the point where believability goes out of the window. Still, the location shooting does look really rather lovely in 1080p and the setup ensures that the DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix has plenty to engage with. Reasonable extras include a commentary and seven deleted scenes.



The Florida Project

Altitude → All-region BD £18



This beautiful, touching and frequently funny film explores the plight of Florida's hidden homeless population

through the eyes of a precocious six-year-old girl (the outrageously talented Brooklynn Prince). As 'hard' as the story may get at times, the unique viewpoint filters it all through a sun-drenched, candy-coloured prism that results in a brightly saturated AVC 2.40:1 Full HD encode. While the bulk of the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is given over to dialogue, discrete effects in the surrounds improve your immersion. Extras taking the form of a *Making of...*, interviews and bloopers.



Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool

Lionsgate → Region B BD £25



Annette Bening and Jamie Bell star in this unlikely but true biopic covering the final years

of movie star Gloria Grahame's life, specifically her romance with the much younger stage actor Peter Turner and her battle with cancer. This tender and brilliantly acted love story arrives on Blu-ray with a warm 2.40:1-framed 1080p encode and pleasing DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. While there's only one extra (a commentary from director Paul McGuigan, producer Barbara Broccoli and the real Peter Turner), at least it's a damn good one.



Wonder

Lionsgate → Region B BD £25



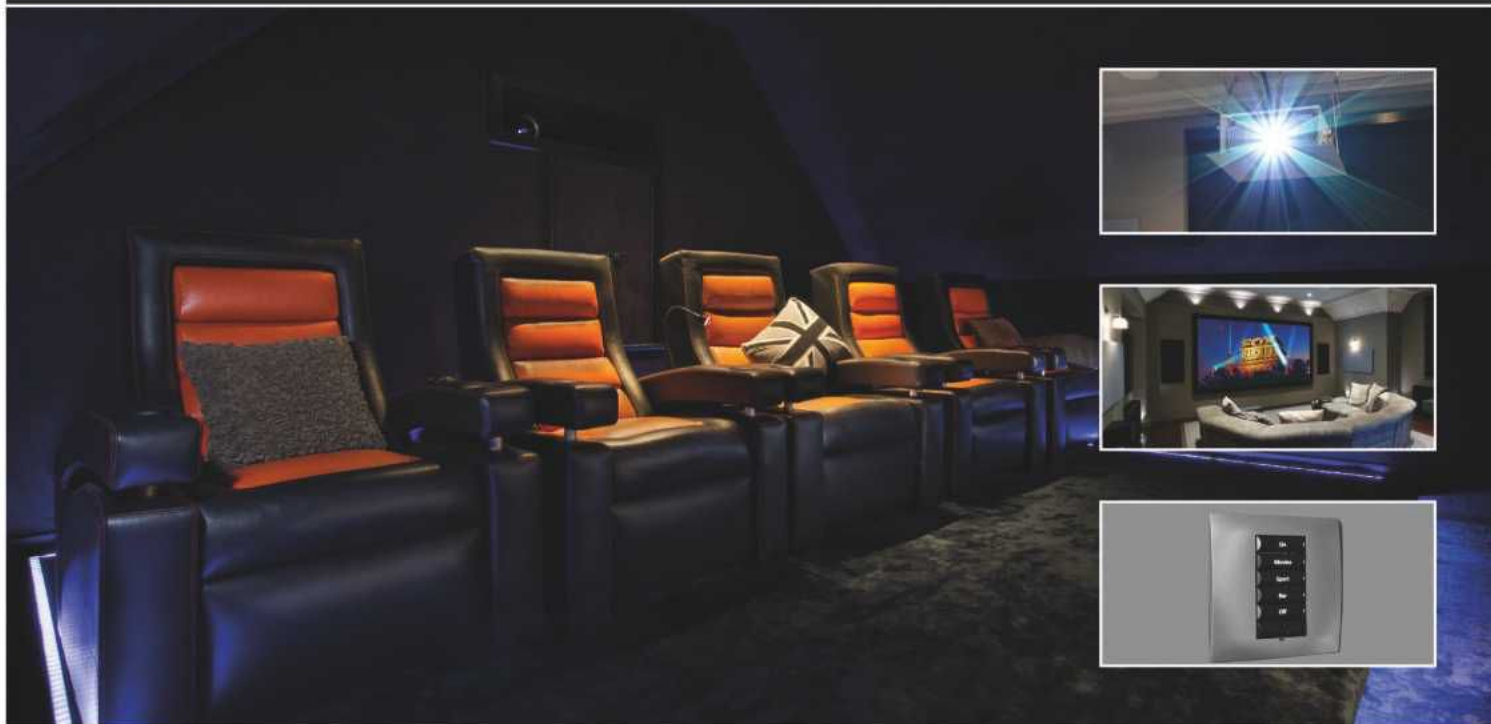
This well-intentioned, if somewhat pedestrian, drama about a young boy with facial

deformities starting school for the first time (played by Jacob Tremblay), walks a very fine line between uplifting entertainment and mawkish sentimentality. For the most part it stays on the right side of that line, thank largely to the excellent cast (which also includes Julia Roberts and Owen Wilson) and director Stephen Chbosky's handling of the material. As well as pristine 1080p visuals and surprisingly immersive Dolby TrueHD 7.1 audio, the Blu-ray also delivers a decent set of extras.



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André Morell played the lead in the BBC TV version of *Quatermass and the Pit*, but not the later Hammer film



Crime does pay for Hammer

Boxset proves there was more to the iconic British film company than supernatural monsters

→ HAMMER: VOLUME TWO – CRIMINAL INTENT

Although British film production company Hammer has become pretty much synonymous with horror these days, it actually produced movies across a wide variety of genres including comedy (*Up the Creek*), action-adventure (*The Brigand of Kandahar*), war (*The Steel Bayonet*), science-fiction (*Moon Two Zero*) and even TV spin-offs (*On the Buses*). It was also responsible for a number of fine crime thrillers, which is where this second in Indicator's series of Hammer Blu-ray boxsets comes in...

Hammer: Volume Two – Criminal Intent kicks off with 1958's engaging *The Snorkel*. The tale of a man who kills his wife by gassing her (while wearing a snorkel so it doesn't affect him), the film fits the *Columbo* school of crime thriller where the audience are in on whodunnit right from the start. The fun comes from watching the victim's teenage daughter (Mandy Miller) indulge in a game of cat and mouse with the killer as she begins her own investigation.

Next up, and arguably one of the set's biggest surprises, is the controversial 1960 film *Never Take Sweets from a Stranger*. Doing exactly what it says on the tin, this movie offers a powerful exploration of corruption and abuse of power in a small Canadian town when two girls become the victims of a sexual predator.

Despite allowing director Val Guest to do his best Hitchcock impression, the same year's *The Full Treatment* is the least satisfying of the four films



here. While the plot, about a racing driver suffering from mental problems after a crash who puts himself at the mercy of an unbalanced psychologist, is sound, it drags on for too long and is let down by a rather unconvincing lead performance.

Last up comes the wonderful *Cash on Demand* (1961). This delightfully tense and lean morality tale/chamber piece stars Peter Cushing as an officious bank manager who is forced to assist the suave criminal (André Morell) holding his family hostage.

Picture: All four films feature restored black-and-white AVC encodes, albeit in a mix of two different aspect ratios (1.66:1 for *The Snorkel* and *Cash on Demand*, 2.35:1 for the 'filmed in Megascope' *Never Take Sweets from a Stranger* and *The Full Treatment*).

Image quality is generally very good, with deep blacks, accurate contrast and good detailing present throughout. The obvious exception being the scenes added to the longer US cut of *Cash on Demand*, which are softer and exhibit obvious print damage.

Audio: Lossless mono soundtracks all sound about as good as you could hope for, with no distortions or other age-related issues of note.

Extras: Each of the four films is accompanied by a host of dedicated extras including newly created featurettes, interviews, trailers, photo galleries and booklets. *The Snorkel* and *Cash on Demand* also boast informative commentaries.

You can also choose to watch alternate US cuts of *The Full Treatment* and *Cash on Demand*, and *Never Take Sweets from a Stranger* with its US title card (*Never Take Candy from a Stranger*).

HCC VERDICT

Hammer Volume Two – Criminal Intent

→ Indicator → All-region BD → £60

WE SAY: This well assembled and extras-rich Blu-ray boxset gives a little-known side of Hammer a chance to shine.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★★

Jigsaw [4K]

Lionsgate → Ultra HD Blu-ray & Region B BD → £30



The notorious 'Jigsaw Killer' returns from the dead (or does he?) to test more people with his deadly traps in this

eighth instalment in the horror franchise. One of the better sequels in the series to date, *Jigsaw* definitely benefits from the jump to Ultra HD Blu-ray, with the 4K HDR10 presentation (also Dolby Vision for those with the necessary hardware) getting the best out of the vivid colour grading and textured environments. This 4K platter also features the same spacious Dolby Atmos mix and interesting bonus features that featured on the Blu-ray we reviewed last issue.

**The Toolbox Murders**

88 Films → Region B BD £15



This notorious 1978 flick finds a maniac in a ski mask killing the 'sinful' female residents of a

Los Angeles apartment complex with the contents of his toolbox, before kidnapping one girl to take the place of his dead daughter. Slightly more interesting than its reputation suggests, this former 'video nasty' arrives on Blu-ray completely uncut and with a new 1.78:1 transfer that does a good job replicating the film's rough and grainy aesthetic. Pick of the extras are a commentary by genre experts Justin Kerswell and Calum Waddell, and an interview with actress Kelly Nichols.

**Wishmaster**

Lionsgate – Vestron Collector's Series → Region B BD → £25



This 1997 chiller stars the scenery-chewing Andrew Divoff as an evil Djinn who grants wishes that always come back

to bite those who made them. While the way in which the wishes are twisted around are often painfully contrived, *Wishmaster* can still put a smile on the face of fright fans with its gleefully gory practical effects and roster of horror icons who pop up in cameo roles. On top of a reasonable 1.78:1 1080p encode and lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio, this Blu-ray also hosts an extremely generous batch of extras, including two chat-tracks and five cast and crew interviews.

**The Gate**

Lionsgate – Vestron Collector's Series → Region B BD → £25



A young Stephen Dorff is terrorised by tiny demons that emerge from a gateway to hell in his own back garden

in this energetic, kid-friendly, 1987 fright flick. Even if *The Gate*'s 1.85:1 Full HD encode can be a little inconsistent at times, colour saturation is generally very good and textures are clearly resolved. The DTS-HD MA 2.0 stereo soundtrack is also a little more adventurous and forceful than you might expect. Bonus goodies include two chat-tracks, an isolated music track with composer commentary, extensive interviews, an archival *Making of...* and storyboards.



The worm has turned hi-def

Ken Russell's phallic farce pops up on Blu-ray. But don't bother telling Hugh Grant

→ THE LAIR OF THE WHITE WORM

Peter Capaldi charming a vampiric snake-man with his bagpipes! Amanda Donahoe paralysing a bathing Boy Scout! Hugh Grant chopping a housewife in half with a broadsword! A giant snake attacking Christ on the cross while Roman soldiers ravage nuns in a convent! These are just some of the unforgettable sights director Ken Russell has in store for you in his 1988 film *The Lair of the White Worm*.

Loosely based on Bram Stoker's little-read horror novel of the same name (which was itself undoubtedly inspired by the legend of the Lambton Worm), Russell's film doesn't actually offer much in the way of chills. Those with an affinity for his flamboyant and colourful style of filmmaking will still find much to enjoy about this over-the-top romp, which packs a wild mix of ancient snake gods, hallucinatory dream sequences, phallic symbols and bawdy humour.

According to one of the extra feature interviews, Hugh Grant is apparently embarrassed to have this bonkers flick on his CV. This feels a little odd when he seems happy to appear in movies that are far more insulting, such as *American Dreamz* and *Did You Hear About the Morgans?*...

Picture: *The Lair of the White Worm* looks about as good as you could hope for on Blu-ray. The film appears to use a lot of natural light, and as such the 1.78:1 Full HD transfer frequently looks rather cold and drab. Outdoor scenes fare better, bringing a little more colour to the imagery, but at the end of the day



you're dealing with the limitations of the original photography (and some wonderfully low-rent video effects) rather than any issues with the Blu-ray encode itself.

Audio: This DTS-HD MA 2.0 stereo soundtrack is perfectly fine but, just like the image quality, limited by the source material. Indeed, the biggest issue we have is how the clarity of the track serves to draw even more attention to dialogue that was dubbed in post-production (seemingly pretty much everything that comes out of Catherine Oxenberg's mouth).

Extras: As with all of these 'Vestron' releases, there are plenty of bonuses included on the disc for you to dig into. Best by far is the frequently hilarious archival commentary by the late Ken Russell. Other goodies include a second, newer chat-track by Lisi Russell and film historian Matthew Melia, and interviews with the special effects artists, editor, and actress Sammi Davis.



Ken Russell was never one to shy away from courting controversy

HCC VERDICT**The Lair of the White Worm**

→ Lionsgate – Vestron Collector's Series → Region B BD → £25

WE SAY: Superb extras and decent AV ensure that Russell's admirers will lap up this camp horror on BD.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

'I told you to get ahead, not get a head'



Galaxy defenders ride again

Comedy/sci-fi trilogy re-release will remind you of how odd '90s movies could be

→ MEN IN BLACK TRILOGY: LIMITED EDITION STEELBOOK

Aliens exist and are living in secret on Earth, goes the basic premise of this blockbustin' Will Smith movie trilogy, the first of which arrived way back in 1997 when our cinema heroes were wise-cracking cops rather than spandex-suited superheroes.

Taken as a whole, the *MiB* franchise comes across a little under-cooked – the cleverness of its overall idea poorly served by some unimpressive special effects and incoherent plotting. But Smith and fellow star Tommy Lee Jones have the tag-team charisma to pull you through, and the stylistic choices made here, from the quirky soundtrack to the over-the-top set design, are refreshingly brave. Don't be surprised if the 2019 spin-off flick (which won't star Smith or Jones, but may feature Chris 'Thor' Hemsworth), adopts a more straightforward approach.

Individually, the franchise opener remains the best of the trio, while *MiB III* successfully breathes fresh life into the franchise after the rather disappointing 2002 *MiB II*.

Picture: All three *MiB* movies get 4K HDR10 encodes from Sony Pictures that improve on previous incarnations. The final movie, released in 2013, offers the most consistently pleasing image; night-time New York sequences in the first act showcase a gorgeous

mix of solid blacks, shadow detail, crisp highlights and vivid colours.

Each flick was shot on 35mm film, and there's seemingly been no attempt here to cover up the organic origins with nefarious grain reduction.

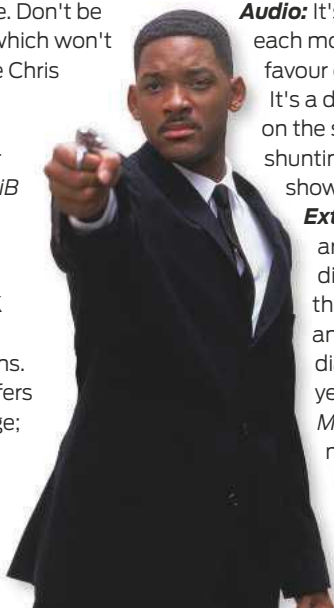
Imagery throughout is sharp, with plenty of fine details apparent, although some shots can appear noticeably softer than others. Furthermore, while *MiB III*'s shot-for-a-3D-conversion nature means even this flat transfer has a good sense of depth, the earlier films can look unimpressively flat at times, an effect of some uninspired cinematography. HDR grading, too, doesn't always entirely feel natural.

Overall, these are decent 4K experiences, but there's perhaps room for improvement.

Audio: It's Atmos remixes all-round here, with each movie's previous 5.1 track jettisoned in favour of a more expansive presentation.

It's a decision that pays dividends, picking up on the series' chaotic and zippy sound design, shunting Foley effects high and wide and showcasing an impressive dynamic range.

Extras: Extras (from previous BD releases) are housed on the accompanying 1080p discs, and there are lots of them, although the final movie is less well-served – an indication of how major studios have dialled back on supplementals over the years. There are chat tracks for *MiB* and *MiB II*, plus featurettes, SFX breakdowns, music videos, gag-reels, *Making of...* docs and much more.



HCC VERDICT

Men in Black Trilogy: Limited Edition Steelbook

→ Sony Pictures → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £72 (Zavvi.com exclusive)

WE SAY: This not-quite-brilliant franchise gets a not-quite-brilliant 4K re-issue.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Boy

Vertigo Releasing → R2 DVD
£13



This month's other Taika Waititi movie (see p96) couldn't be more different from *Thor: Ragnarok*. Made

back in 2010, the writer-director-actor's sophomore film is a big-hearted and very funny coming-of-age story about a boy who must face the fact that his idealised dreams of his absent father fall some way short of reality when the man makes an unexpected reappearance. While this belated UK DVD skimps on extra features (all we get is the trailer), it does at least do the film justice with its very attractive anamorphic 1.85:1 transfer and naturalistic Dolby Digital 5.1 audio.



Ramrod

Arrow Academy → Region B BD
£20



Wild West meets film noir in this compelling hard-boiled cowboy drama starring Veronica Lake and Joel McCrea.

Seemingly based on the same HD master used by Olive Films for its 2012 US Blu-ray, *Ramrod* has undergone some additional clean-up work from Arrow, but still suffers from obvious print damage, going from small nicks to full tramlines. This disc fares considerably better with extras than its US counterpart, though – unlike that barebones platter, here you'll find an audio commentary, a video essay, two lengthy interviews with director Andre de Toth and a photo gallery.



Scalpel

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£25



A plastic surgeon turns a disfigured stripper into his missing daughter's double in order to get his hands on her

inheritance in this wonderfully twisted psychosexual thriller. As well as restoring the film from the best surviving element (a 35mm colour reversal intermediate), Arrow offers two different grades – one with a heavy yellow tint that reflects the director of photography's intended look and a second that has a more 'traditional' appearance (you can even switch seamlessly between them on the fly). Enjoyable extras include a chat track and three newly recorded interviews.



Images

Arrow Academy → Region B BD
£25



Susannah York stars as a woman haunted (quite literally) by the ghosts of her past affairs in this twisty,

dream-like study of mental illness by Robert Altman. Granted a brand-new 4K restoration, *Images* arrives on Blu-ray with an authentically grainy and film-like 2.35:1-framed 1080p encode. The LPCM mono audio won't exactly tax your setup, but serves the film's unnerving score well. A generous array of extras includes a penetrating commentary by critics Samm Deighan and Kat Ellinger, scene select commentary by Robert Altman, and a 2003 interview with the filmmaker.



Play it (again and again) Sam...

Do we really need yet another *Casablanca* Blu-ray? The answer might just surprise you

→ CASABLANCA: PREMIUM COLLECTION

This superb romantic wartime adventure starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman surely ranks alongside *The Wizard of Oz* as Warner Bros.'s most frequently re-released title across all formats. Given that *Casablanca* has already been given an attractive Blu-ray release on these shores (in a choice of regular and Steelbook packaging), is there any reason for you to pick up this new Premium Collection incarnation?

Picture: In a word, yes. The first – and most important – difference is that this new release is based on a 4K restoration prepared for the film's 70th anniversary in the US. Compared to the earlier Blu-ray encode, the 1.37:1-framed 1080p image reveals superior density and fine detailing. Blacks levels are also much improved, while the enhanced sharpness and clarity results in a more refined look to the native film grain. This is the best the film has ever looked on disc.

Audio: *Casablanca*'s mono soundtrack has also been upgraded from the Dolby Digital track found on the earlier release to DTS-HD Master Audio. This is an exquisite presentation of the original sound design that loses the brightness of the 'lossy' incarnation and, as such, sounds much more natural.

Extras: Carried over from previous Blu-rays are an intro by Lauren Bacall; two commentaries by critic Roger Ebert and film historian Rudy Behlmer; the 83-minute *Great Performances: Bacall on Bogart* documentary; a 34-minute tribute to the film; a seven-minute chat with Stephen Bogart



and Pia Lindstrom about their parents; deleted scenes; outtakes; the 1955 TV remake; a 1995 Bugs Bunny cartoon parody (*Carrotblanca*); scoring session recordings; a 1943 radio adaptation; and two trailers.

New to this release is a 'Warner Night at the Movies' mode that recreates the experience of seeing *Casablanca* on its original release by allowing you to watch it preceded by the trailer for *Now Voyager*, newsreel, a short film (*Vaudeville Days*) and three cartoons (one restored in HD). There's also a 37-minute documentary about director Michael Curtiz; another 35-minute documentary about the film; and a second radio adaptation (from 1947).

Meanwhile, a second Blu-ray platter houses a mammoth 289-minute documentary about the history of Warner Bros., plus two additional features (one 94 minutes, the other 58 minutes) dealing with the Warner Brothers themselves.

DISC
OF THE
MONTH



HCC VERDICT

Casablanca: Premium Collection

→ Warner Bros. → All-region BD & R2 DVD → £15 (HMV exclusive)

WE SAY: Of all the *Casablanca* Blu-rays in all the towns in all the world this is the best of the lot.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



4K Guinness worth waiting for

Much-loved war movie gets a masterful Ultra HD BD and Atmos makeover

→ THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI: 60TH ANNIVERSARY

David Lean's WW2 drama classic from 1957 remains a flagbearer for the Technicolor CinemaScope generation. Alec Guinness stars as the defiant British Army officer (and POW) sticking to the rules when tasked with overseeing the construction of a bridge for his Japanese captors; William Holden is the US Navy grunt trying to stop him.

Running for 161 minutes, this is a good hour shorter than Lean's later flick *Lawrence of Arabia*, but equally epic in terms of dramatic scope, performances and cinematography.

Picture: *Bridge...* has long been treated as a jewel in the Sony Pictures crown, previously given a lush Full HD release based upon an extensive 4K restoration. This native 4K HDR release continues the trend.

It doesn't look as irresistibly crisp or polished as a contemporary title, with some shimmering portions of the picture and film grain belying its vintage 35mm origins. Yet grain here is fine and rarely intrusive, unless you insist on viewing at close distance, and it feels very much like a cinematic experience.

The sense of depth to the image is remarkable, earned via the transfer's supreme sharpness and excellent contrast. Jungle locations are rich in foreground and background detail, with plant fronds and grains of dirt ping-pong out from the picture. Facial details are well-presented, frequently showing up beads of sweat, smudges of dirt and a few days' worth of P.O.W. stubble.

HDR grading is perhaps its strong suit. The 2.55:1 cinematography is treated to a more expansive



luminance range, resulting in a brighter, more sun-drenched palette.

Audio: For this 4K release Sony has given *Bridge...* a Dolby Atmos overhaul, and while this doesn't lead to a demo-worthy platter, it certainly improves your sense of immersion, with tangible height placement for specific FX. Around that, the soundfield works well to build locations, and delivers dialogue with absolute clarity.

Extras: The bundled 1080p Blu-ray disc is where you'll find all the extra features, and this is identical to Sony's former Collection's Edition Blu-ray release, right down to the menu design and BD-Live link.

So: nothing new here, but the selection is still worth a browse. Highlights are the *Crossing the Bridge* pop-up trivia track, 53-minute *Making of...* doc, and 1957 promo film about the building of the bridge (*Rise and Fall of a Jungle Giant*). There are also photo galleries, trailers and other short featurettes.

4K
ULTRA
HD



The movie won seven Oscars, including Best Director and Best Picture

HCC VERDICT

The Bridge on the River Kwai: 60th Anniversary

→ Sony Pictures → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: An Atmos remix and resplendent 4K image serve David Lean's superb drama well.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Groundhog Day: 25th Anniversary [4K]

Sony Pictures → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30



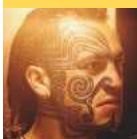
Sony Pictures continues to confound expectations with its rather eccentric approach to choosing which catalogue titles to issue on UHD Blu-ray. While this Bill Murray comedy

may not seem like an obvious candidate for such an upgrade, you'll still be glad that Sony bothered. Okay, so the rather dreary palette doesn't give the format's HDR and wide colour talents much to work with, but compared to the accompanying 1080p version, the 4K encode is sharper, more detailed and ultimately much more film-like. Meanwhile, an Atmos upgrade expands the depth of the soundtrack.

★★★★★

Once Were Warriors

Second Sight → Region B BD
£20



Bristling with anger and energy, Lee Tamahori's exploration of the effects of alcoholism and domestic violence

in an urban Maori family was a smash hit in New Zealand on its release in 1994. Almost a quarter of a century later, the film has lost none of its power and this well-presented Blu-ray really shows it off to its very best. However, the highlight here is the superb *Once Were Warriors: Where Are They Now?*, which reunites the principal cast for the first time in 20 years to discuss the film's production and impact. A half-hour interview with Lee Tamahori is also included.

★★★★★

The Handmaid's Tale

Fabulous Films → Region B BD
£15



Comparisons to last year's TV adaptation of Margaret Atwood's dystopian bestseller do this 1990 bigscreen

version no favours. What once seemed merely to be an uneven piece of cinema now feels like an irredeemably drab and diluted take on the source material that lacks any of the narrative scope or visual flair of the recent smallscreen incarnation. *The Handmaid's Tale* arrives on Blu-ray with a deliberately cool-looking 1.85:1 Full HD encode, supported by a low-key DTS-HD MA stereo soundtrack. A rather rough-looking trailer is the sole bonus feature included on the disc.

★★★★★

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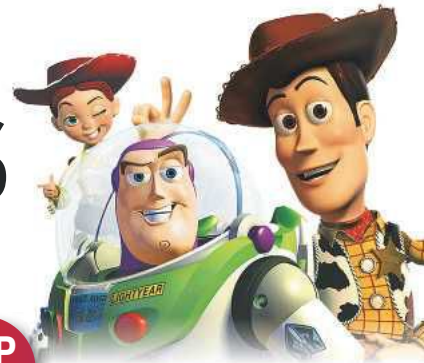
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Collecting...

Pixar animations

Fresh from catching up with *Coco* on Ultra HD Blu-ray, **Team HCC** rounds up 10 more must-see films and shorts from the cartoon powerhouse...


**TOP
PICK**

TOY STORY 2

While 1995's *Toy Story* really put Pixar on the map and introduced audiences to CG animation, it was this 1999 follow-up that cemented the studio's reputation as a force to be reckoned with. Originally planned as a direct-to-video sequel, *Toy Story 2* blossomed into a dazzlingly inventive and witty exploration of loss and love writ large on the bigscreen, digging even deeper into its cast of CG characters and imbuing them with a heart and soul that many live-action films can't manage with their flesh-and-blood creations. That said, all three *Toy Story* films are superb and you can't go wrong with any of them...

Get it: Until a 4K release rolls up, the best current version is the feature-packed Special Edition Blu-ray – although 3D cinema fans should also check out the film's 3D conversion on BD.



KNICK KNACK

John Lasseter's CG short about a souvenir snowman trying to escape the confines of a snow globe became a festival favourite upon its release in 1989 thanks to its deft characterisation and side-splitting humour.

Get it: *Knick Knack* was included on both the *Finding Nemo* and *Pixar Short Films Collection: Volume One* Blu-rays – although only in a censored version. For the original incarnation, you'll have to track down the *Toy Story: Deluxe CAV Laserdisc Edition* (1996) and *Tiny Toy Stories* (1997) Laserdiscs.



MONSTERS, INC.

This amusing 2001 feature about a pair of monsters who scare kids to generate energy for the city of Monstropolis presented Pixar with one of its toughest challenges to date: fur. But the studio didn't skip on the details and eventually devised a way of convincingly animating the 2,320,413 individual hairs that covered Sulley's entire body!

Get it: The feature-packed two-disc Blu-ray is the way to go here. Although, if you really wanted to push the boat out, you could import the five-disc US release.



INSIDE OUT

Sandwiched between the disappointing *Monsters University* and *The Good Dinosaur*, director Pete Docter's clever and hilarious 2015 film proved that Pixar hadn't lost its mojo.

Get it: While *Inside Out* was given a two-disc Blu-ray release in the US, in the UK the only way to get the bonus BD platter was to pick up the Zavvi-exclusive limited edition steelbook.



THE BLUE UMBRELLA

Pixar offers up its own take on the familiar boy-meets-girl story with this delightful 2013 short about a blue and a red umbrella who fall for each other in a rainswept city. What sets the short apart from other Pixar projects is the photorealistic style, which gives *The Blue Umbrella* the look of a live-action production (except for the boldly cartoonish faces sported by the brollies).

Get it: A 1080p presentation of *The Blue Umbrella* is included on the *Monsters University* Blu-ray.



WALL-E

Pixar continued to showcase its mastery of the cinematic arts with this 2008 Oscar-winner about the last robot left on Earth, after the planet has been abandoned by humanity and turned into one giant rubbish dump. Speaking volumes without actually saying anything, *WALL-E* opens with an audacious dialogue-free first act before taking to the stars for a frenetic, chase-packed climax – and some weighty ecological themes...

Get it: Disney's two-disc Blu-ray release sports a stellar 2.40:1 Full HD encode, peerless DTS-HD MA 6.1 sonics and plenty of extras.



RATATOUILLE

Showing the studio's knack of crafting stories no one else would ever think of, *Ratatouille* focuses on a rat-turned-chef seeking success in Paris, and crams in everything from a *Goodfellas* homage to a surprisingly serious discussion on the role of the 'critic'. Skilful animation, a wicked sense of humour and some standout set-pieces make it a mid-period Pixar classic.

Get it: The 2007 UK release offers some fun extras, LPCM 5.1 audio and a gorgeous image. A 3D version is also available.



PIPER

Quite possibly the cutest thing you'll ever see, this short accompanied *Finding Dory* on the bigscreen and follows a baby sandpiper as it learns to overcome its fear of water in order to feed. Funny and heartwarming, *Piper* was deservedly given the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 2017.

Get it: *Piper* can be found on all UK *Finding Dory* BDs – but the 3D Blu-ray includes a stereoscopic version. Disney's later 'Big Sleeve' 2D reissue of *Finding Dory* added a bonus disc among other goodies.



THE INCREDIBLES

Disappointed by the handling of his previous animated film (*The Iron Giant*) by Warner Bros., Brad Bird migrated to Pixar to make this supremely entertaining tale of a family of superheroes struggling to live an 'ordinary' suburban life.

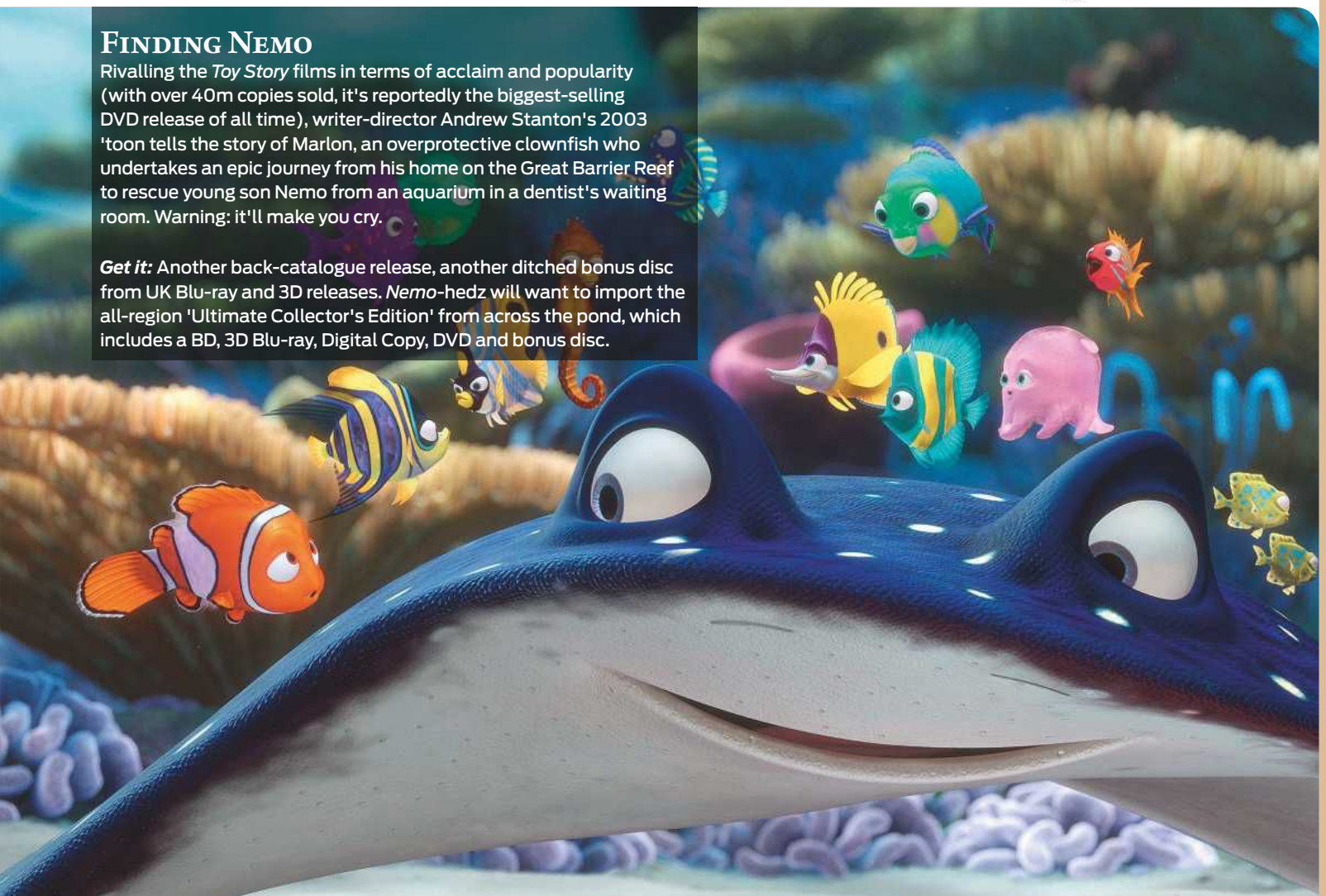
Get it: Disney pulled its all-too-familiar (but still maddening) trick of ditching the bonus platter from this back-catalogue UK Blu-ray release in 2011. So do yourself a favour and import the two-disc US version instead.



FINDING NEMO

Rivalling the *Toy Story* films in terms of acclaim and popularity (with over 40m copies sold, it's reportedly the biggest-selling DVD release of all time), writer-director Andrew Stanton's 2003 'toon tells the story of Marlon, an overprotective clownfish who undertakes an epic journey from his home on the Great Barrier Reef to rescue young son Nemo from an aquarium in a dentist's waiting room. Warning: it'll make you cry.

Get it: Another back-catalogue release, another ditched bonus disc from UK Blu-ray and 3D releases. *Nemo*-hedz will want to import the all-region 'Ultimate Collector's Edition' from across the pond, which includes a BD, 3D Blu-ray, Digital Copy, DVD and bonus disc.



Have we missed one of your favourite Pixar animations?
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→ **GEAR GUIDE** **TELEVISIONS** From entry-level 40in LEDs to flagship 4K monsters
BLU-RAY PLAYERS Which deck rules the roost? **PROJECTORS** It's time to blow up your video!
AV RECEIVERS 5.1, 7.1, 11.2 – we've got all the options covered **SPEAKERS** Killer surround sound setups
for all rooms and budgets **PVRs** Including super-slim Freeview boxes and Sky Q **AND MORE!**



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

TOP 10 Televisions

**01 Sony KD-65ZD9** → £3,000 ★★★★★

Sony finished 2016 on a high with this full-array LED Bravia (with advanced local dimming tech) that claims a 1,800-nit peak brightness and DV support. Cinematic, sublime pictures – the 100in version [HCC #282] is even more impressive. HCC #267

**02 Sony KD-55A1** → £2,800 ★★★★★

Another Sony set due a Dolby Vision upgrade, this 55in OLED dazzles with its image quality (including superb motion processing), hidden Acoustic Surface speaker technology and eye-catching styling. HCC #275

**03 LG OLED65E7**

→ £3,800 ★★★★★

3D playback is dropped, but the E7 offers welcome picture improvements over last year's E6, particularly brightness and near-black talents. Supports Dolby Vision. HCC #274

**04 Panasonic TX-55EZ952**

→ £2,000 ★★★★★

A 55in OLED TV with an effortlessly naturalistic performance, although not as bright as some rivals. Gorgeous, understated design and premium build quality. HCC #277

**05 Philips 55POS9002**

→ £2,000 ★★★★★

Philips' second-gen Android-powered OLED takes a more refined approach to its processing, focusing on balanced cinematic imagery. Ambilight, as usual, boosts your immersion. HCC #276

**06 Samsung UE49MU7000**

→ £750 ★★★★★

Not one of Samsung's top-flight TVs, but a cracking mid-range 49in model that presents 4K and HD material with bright, rich colours and stable blacks. Good choice for an affordable setup. HCC #277

**07 Samsung QE65Q9F**

→ £3,500 ★★★★★

This premium 'QLED' screen outguns rivals when it comes to brightness and visual impact. Routinely stunning, but edge LED lighting has some niggles. Supports Samsung's HDR 10+ format. HCC #273

**08 Sony KD-55XE8596**

→ £900 ★★★★★

A real 4K bargain, combining a 55in screen with a solid picture performance. HDR doesn't zing due to a lack of sheer brightness, but it benefits from backlight stability. Impressive with regular HD, too. HCC #278

**09 Panasonic TX-65EX750**

→ £1,500 ★★★★★

A (surprise!) 3D-capable LED screen that offers well-controlled backlighting, pleasing 4K clarity and good HD upscaling. Not the brightest around, and some colour inconsistencies. HCC #279

**10 LG 55SJ850V**

→ £900 ★★★★★

Backlight distractions hinder this set's performance in low-lit rooms, but it's a strong all-rounder, offering Dolby Vision HDR, WebOS smarts, well-rounded sonics and a bargain price tag. HCC #276

TOP 5 Blu-ray movies

**Blade Runner 2049 [Ultra HD Blu-ray]**

A smart, evocative sequel that proves worth the wait, and blessed on Warner's US 4K platter with a pin-sharp image and spine-tingling Dolby Atmos soundmix. HCC #283

★★★★★

**Death of Stalin**

More superb political satire from Armando 'In The Loop' Iannucci. Entertainment One's BD may be light on extras, but the chat-track is well worth a listen, and DTS-HD 5.1 audio works well with the source material. HCC #283

★★★★★

**It**

Bill Skarsgard terrifies as Pennywise in this smart and slick adaptation of Stephen King's imaginative novel. Creepy sonics, crisp 1080p visuals and some meaty extras round out the BD package. HCC #282

★★★★★

**Paddington 2 [Ultra HD Blu-ray]**

A sequel that's better than its forebear (if you pardon the pun), Paddington 2 is sweet, funny and its 4K HDR presentation shows a clear improvement over its SDR counterpart. HCC #283

★★★★★

**Dunkirk**

The soundmix here may be only a 'flat' 5.1 DTS-HD affair, but it's a masterclass in sonic engineering, crafting the tension in Chris Nolan's gorgeous-looking and refreshingly compact WWII drama/thriller. HCC #281

★★★★★

TOP 10 Blu-rays



01 Oppo UDP-203 → £650 ★★★★★

Oppo refreshes its player hardware with a superb universal design with Ultra HD playback (including Dolby Vision via firmware update). Packed with user adjustments and connectivity. No apps or Darbee processing, though. HCC #269



02 Oppo UDP-205 → £1,400 ★★★★★

This pricey, peerless UHD deck flaunts universal disc playback, asynchronous USB input, headphone amp and balanced stereo outs amongst its audiophile features. One for musos. HCC #274



03 Sony UBP-X800 → £270 ★★★★★

Sony embraces UHD Blu-ray with a full-width, sturdy design that'll also spin DVD-A and SACD platters. A great all-rounder, but no current Dolby Vision support or word on an update. HCC #274



04 Panasonic DMP-UB900 → £370 ★★★★★

The Ultra HD Blu-ray format got an inspiring debut in Panasonic's multi-talented deck that offers a sterling picture performance, 4K-enabled VOD apps and analogue audio outs. No DV. HCC #259



05 Cambridge Audio CXUHD → £800 ★★★★★

The lack of analogue outputs is a surprise considering CA's heritage, but this universal (and DV-capable) deck sounds sweet over its digital outs. As with Oppo's UDP-203, a MediaTek SoC is used. HCC #279



06 Panasonic DMP-UB700 → £300 ★★★★★

Shorn of some of the audiophile niceties of the UB900 (including multichannel analogue outputs), but still a safe pair of hands with your 4K BDs. And at a bargain price. HCC #270



07 Arcam FMJ UDP411 → £800 ★★★★★

Pristine visuals – including upscaled SD – and a classy sonic performance grant this Arcam instant appeal. The design and build is commensurate with the premium price tag. HCC #244



08 Panasonic DMP-UB300 → £130 ★★★★★

Great 4K imagery from this bargain deck, but you might prefer to up your budget for the UB700 – no split HDMI, optical/coaxial or Wi-Fi connections here. Half-size design for an easy install. HCC #272



09 Samsung UBD-K8500 → £180 ★★★★★

Debut Ultra HD Blu-ray player that finds fans courtesy of its sensible price point (now even lower), connected smarts and eye-catching visuals. Build quality is a little uninspiring. HCC #260



10 Samsung UBD-M9500 → £230 ★★★★★

Second-gen 4K player that adds features (mobile BD streaming, 360-degree image support) but removes 3D playback capability. As before, the chassis is curved. UHD discs look pin-sharp. HCC #275



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TOP 10 Projectors



01 Sony VPL-VW760ES → £15,000 ★★★★★

This premium beamer adds laser illumination to Sony's 4K SXRD projection technology, and the results are staggering. It's not super-bright, but images are detailed, vivid and supremely well-balanced. Worthy of flagship status. HCC #283



02 JVC DLA-X5900 → £4,000 ★★★★★

An outstanding performer at this price point. JVC's latest D-ILA model may lack native 4K silicon but its eShift 4K engine shows real improvement and HDR playback has been greatly boosted too. A compelling home cinema PJ. HCC #282



03 Sony VPL-HW45ES

→ £2,000 ★★★★★

The most affordable model in Sony's home cinema range, the Full HD-resolution 45ES features excellent light management for a routinely cinematic image. Great value. HCC #263



04 Optoma UHD60

→ £2,400 ★★★★★

An assured Ultra HD debut from Optoma – the UHD60 presents 4K Blu-rays with a pleasing contrast balance and lush detail. SDR-HDR conversion tool is best avoided, though. HCC #277



05 Optoma UHZ65

→ £5,000 ★★★★★

The asking price here reflects Optoma's addition of laser illumination (yielding improved contrast and far greater 'lamp' life) to the DLP 4K and HDR playback talents of its stablemates. HCC #282



06 Acer V7850

→ £2,700 ★★★★★

One rung below Acer's largescale V9800 4K debut sits this more affordable model. Again, black levels aren't its strong point, but this runs bright, sharp and super-quiet. HCC #276



07 Epson EH-TW6700

→ £1,300 ★★★★★

HDR and 4K scaling are off the menu, leaving this mid-range model to concentrate on cinematic HD images. Bright, crisp performance, plenty of tweaks, but no 12V trigger. HCC #271



08 Sony VPL-VW260ES

→ £5,200 ★★★★★

Sony's base-level 4K PJ comes with a few strings attached (brightness and colour range are limited), but it's a tempter for anyone spec'ing a UHD theatre. HCC #280



09 Epson EH-TW7300

→ £2,200 ★★★★★

Similar performance traits to its bigger EH-TW9300 sibling, but with reductions in max brightness (and claimed contrast). Currently the most affordable HDR model around. HCC #269



10 BenQ W1050

→ £500 ★★★★★

There are a few cut corners on this budget DLP 1080p model (no backlight on the remote, no lens shift, a meagre zoom), but overall movie performance is good for the money. HCC #283

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TOP 10 Speakers



01 Monitor Audio Gold 300AV →£7,150 ★★★★★

MA revamps its Gold Series and we pay serious attention. This big-ticket package excels across the frequency range, offers exquisite design and packs setup flexibility via the dipole/monopole FX surrounds. *HCC #251*



02 Wharfedale DX-2 →£450 ★★★★★

The asking price of this 5.1 system will tell you it doesn't deliver the last word in surround sound fidelity, but Wharfedale's package is compact, well-made and faultlessly delivers on its home-cinema-on-a-budget promise. *HCC #283*



03 KEF R Series 7.1 →£6,500 ★★★★★

A 7.1 set mixing dipole and direct surrounds, this package takes its cues from KEF's Blade and offers faultless, largescale home cinema sonics. *HCC #217*



04 KEF Q Series 5.1.2 →£3,300 ★★★★★

KEF's revamped Q Series now offers Atmos modules for an up-to-the-minute sonic experience. Big, bold-looking speakers. Robust, immersive audio. *HCC #280*



05 ATC HTS7 5.1 →£3,500 ★★★★★

Brit brand ATC rejigs the driver tech and neutral sound of its SCM range into a wall-mountable, flexible system perfect for discreet AV setups. *HCC #275*



06 Monitor Audio Silver 500 5.1 →£3,650 ★★★★★

The new Silver range offers a potent EQ-able sub, sweet design, dipole surrounds and largescale, nuanced sonics. Atmos upfiring models would be nice, though. *HCC #282*



07 Wharfedale Diamond 11 HCP →£800 ★★★★★

Bookshelf speakers and 10in sub combine in a system that offers mid-range and treble finesse and a healthy dollop of boisterous bass. Fun and affordable. *HCC #279*



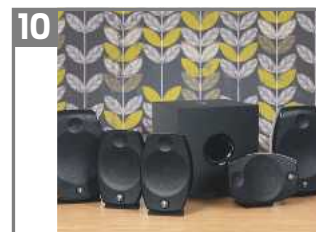
08 DALI Opticon 5.1 →£3,200 ★★★★★

The Opticons employ driver designs from DALI's high-end models, and showcase a talent for involving music presentation and thrilling home cinema. *HCC #260*



09 Polk Signature Series 5.1 →£1,450 ★★★★★

Largescale performance from a well-priced floorstanding system with slimmed-down centre enclosure. Upfront and boisterous sound; a great entertainer. *HCC #273*



10 Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2 →£1,200 ★★★★★

Enjoyable-sounding and well-priced sub/sat system with Atmos upfiring in front L/R enclosures. Not the smallest 'satellite' speakers around. *HCC #276*

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TOP 10 AV Receivers/AV Processors



01 Denon AVR-X6400H → £2,100 ★★★★★

This receiver's 11 channels of power are joined by Atmos, DTS:X and integrated Auro-3D, plus HEOS multiroom integration, making it peerlessly flexible. Sound delivery is quick-footed and articulate. A superb one-box solution. HCC #280



02 Arcam AVR850 → £4,500 ★★★★★

High-end seven-channel AVR marrying Class G amplification and Atmos (and future DTS:X) support with talented Dirac Live Room EQ. 11-channel pre-outs for full-fat setups. HCC #257



03 Anthem MRX 1120 → £4,000 ★★★★★

Combining Anthem's superb ARC room EQ system with 11-channel amplification makes this an essential consideration for full-spec Atmos setups. Muscular, precise sound. But no networking skills. HCC #265



04 Marantz NR1608 → £600 ★★★★★

With a smoother sound signature than before and the addition of HEOS multiroom, Marantz's 7.1-channel slim-line AVR flies the flag for living-room friendly AV. Only one HDMI out, though. HCC #278



05 Sony STR-DN1080 → £550 ★★★★★

Sony is back in the AVR game with a first Atmos model that adds worthy phantom rear speaker processing to its 5.1.2 sonics. A few UI niggles don't take much of the shine off an impressive budget buy. HCC #277



06 Denon AVR-X4300H → £1,300 ★★★★★

Nine-channel receiver with HEOS multiroom integration and 11-channel processing (Atmos, DTS:X, plus Auro-3D as a paid-for upgrade). Great, detailed sound and foolproof usability. HCC #267



07 Pioneer VSX-1131 → £550 ★★★★★

Seven-channel model with Atmos and DTS:X support that features an overhauled remote control and UI to improve usability. Bass-rich, energetic sound. HCC #265



08 Marantz SR7012 → £1,700 ★★★★★

Nine-channel design (with 11.2 processing) for Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D configurations. Well-featured, and solid and sophisticated in use, but not an all-out action monster. HCC #282



09 Yamaha RX-A860 → £900 ★★★★★

Only seven channels and hindered by only three HDCP 2.2-enabled HDMI inputs, but beyond that this flexible MusicCast AVR proves a great listen, with plenty of DSP toys. HCC #270



10 Denon HEOS AVR → £800 ★★★★★

Able to run wireless rears/sub (using HEOS models) and sporting a display-free design, this is a five-channel AVR with a different approach. One for HEOS devotees only. HCC #276

TOP 5 Bonus features



mother! The Downward Spiral

Darren Aronofsky's off-beat psychological thriller isn't for everyone, but this doc provides fascinating insight into the film's conception, planning and 16mm capture. HCC #282

★★★★★



Kingsman: Inside the Golden Circle

A near two-hour doc, split into nine parts, is perhaps more than this hit-n-miss sequel deserves, but there's plenty of info and insight here into K2's production. HCC #283

★★★★★



The Gorgon

Accompanying the Peter Cushing/Christopher Lee flick in Indicator's *Hammer: Volume One - Fear Warning!* boxset is a reproduction of its 1977 *House of Hammer* comic book adaptation. Read it and shriek... HCC #280

★★★★★



Impressions: A Journey Behind the Scenes of Twin Peaks

Twin Peaks fans can delve deep into the recent series' production with this 291-minute fly-on-the-wall *Making of...* doc that gets its own BD platter. HCC #281

★★★★★



It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World: Extended Cut

Not quite the original theatrical Cinerama version (202 minutes, now lost) but a 198-minute cut put together from numerous sources. A labour of love that varies in image quality. HCC #278

★★★★★

TOP 10 Subwoofers



01 SVS SB-2000 → £600 ★★★★★

This follow up to the SB-1000 offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbibes Blu-rays with quick, taut and potent LFE, it's a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. *HCC #233*



02 REL No.25 → £6,500 ★★★★★

REL celebrates its 25th anniversary in style with this 15in/1,000W premium concoction that exhibits exhilarating speed and nuance down to serious depths. Big, but beautiful. *HCC #271*



03 Bowers & Wilkins DB1D

→ £3,750 ★★★★★

This sequel to the DB1 moves EQ to an app and changes driver/amp design. Beautifully controlled performance with depth and detail. Gorgeous bodywork. *HCC #277*



04 JL Audio Fathom f212v2

→ £6,500 ★★★★★

A second outing for JL's 2 x 12in monster, with an increase in power (3,600W) and room EQ improvements among the changes. Sounds as good as you'd imagine. *HCC #261*



05 SVS SB16-Ultra

→ £2,500 ★★★★★

A 16in driver and 1,500W amp combine to give SVS's flagship sealed sub real appeal. Goes low but remains tight and fast. App-assisted EQ and operation. *HCC #270*



06 REL T7i

→ £850 ★★★★★

Easy to house 8in sub (with 10in passive driver). Decent LF extension joined by superb speed. Wireless transmission via optional (£200) system. *HCC #277*



07 BK Electronics P12-300SB-DF

→ £475 ★★★★★

Bass heads can get outrageous value for money in the shape of BK's overperforming 12in sub. A front-firing model is also offered. *HCC #247*



08 GoldenEar SuperSub X

→ £1,450 ★★★★★

Four drivers squeezed into a relatively compact design and given plenty of push from a 1,400W amp. Standout traits are impact and depth. *HCC #272*



09 SVS PC-2000

→ £800 ★★★★★

Cylinder construction means this 12in, 500W design can boast a large cabinet but a relatively small footprint. Good value with weighty, slamming bass. *HCC #267*



10 KEF Kube10b

→ £600 ★★★★★

The middle option of KEF's new Kube range packs a 10in driver, 300W Class D amp and 56-bit DSP engine to maintain efficient low-frequency control. *HCC #283*

TOP 5 Console games



Uncharted: Lost Legacy

The Drake brothers are replaced by two new heroines in the latest instalment of Sony's PlayStation puzzler. The open-world element hides the relatively short nature of its story mode; HDR visuals are stunning. *HCC #277*

★★★★★



Call of Duty: WWII

Eschewing the more fantastical elements of recent COD entries and giving greater emphasis to tactics and staying alive, this is a reminder of why the FPS franchise is so well loved. Superb sound FX, too. *HCC #282*

★★★★★



Monster Hunter: World

This series breaks out of its Nintendo origins to offer PS4/Xbox One owners varied, open-world gameplay, plus HDR and better-than-HD visuals that can be tailored to your desire. Monstrous fun. *HCC #283*

★★★★★



Super Mario Odyssey

Mario returns in this standout title for Nintendo's Switch console that endows its platforming fun with superior game mechanics, eye-popping visuals and a foot-tapping score. A genuine masterpiece. *HCC #280*

★★★★★



Injustice 2

Brilliant follow up to the 2013 superhero beat-'em-up classic, letting you dole out a good kicking to the bad guys while playing as DC Comics legends. Advanced resolution via PS4, plus HDR. *HCC #275*

★★★★★

TOP 10 Accessories



01 KEF R50 → £600 ★★★★★

KEF's Dolby Atmos-enabled reflective modules are a smart choice to beef up a system. Using the company's Uni-Q point source drivers pays dividends, enabling full-range sonics that reach deep into your cinema room. First-rate build. *HCC #252*



03



Amazon Echo Dot

→ £50 ★★★★★

Less impressive as a standalone speaker than its larger sibling, but more affordable. Use its 3.5mm output and Bluetooth to pair with third-party kit. Fun AI experience. A real bargain. *HCC #269*

04



Nvidia Shield Android TV

→ £180 ★★★★★

The Android-based streamer/gaming box gets a gentle revamp – same silicon, neater design, new features including future support for Google Assistant. Slick and easy to use. *HCC #272*

05



Roku Streaming Stick+

→ £70 ★★★★★

If a simple life is your aim, this content-rich, 4K/HDR-capable dongle from the streaming specialist is your friend. Idiot-proof interface and control. Good price. *HCC #282*

06



Amazon Fire TV (2017)

→ £70 ★★★★★

HDR playback has been added to Amazon's great-value media streamer, although the absence of an Ethernet port does niggle considering its 4K talents. Cluttered UI. *HCC #280*

07



Logitech Harmony Elite

→ £270 ★★★★★

Flexible and relatively easy to set up, this all-in-one remote package combines touchscreen handset and hub with smart device app. Worthwhile if you have a stacked kit rack. *HCC #256*

08



Naim Uniti Atom

→ £1,900 ★★★★★

Naim's gorgeous Uniti Atom combines DAC, 2 x 40W amp and network/wireless streaming for an audiophile hub. Get this HDMI upgrade model to add your flatscreen TV to the action. *HCC #278*

09



PSB Imagine XA

→ £350 ★★★★★

These two-way Dolby Atmos-enabled upfiring speakers are fairly chunky, but work well at creating a height layer and the £350-per-pair ticket makes them an enticing option. *HCC #264*

10



Xbox One X

→ £450 ★★★★★

The most advanced games console on the planet dazzles with its native 4K HDR gaming chops, but the price tag is hefty and heavyweight users may wish it came with more than 1TB of storage. *HCC #280*

TOP 5 Blu-ray/DVD boxsets



Blue Planet II

A fine 4K companion to the BBC's previous *Planet Earth II*, this set delivers seven episodes of expertly edited and informative natural history, with crisp, colour-rich HDR visuals and immersive audio. *HCC #283* ★★★★★



The Wonderful Worlds of Ray Harryhausen: Vol. Two

Another trio of vintage flicks in a sumptuous package from Indicator. Here it's *Mysterious Island*, *Jason and The Argonauts* and *First Men in the Moon* given the deluxe treatment. *HCC #281* ★★★★★



Harry Potter: 8-Film Collection [Ultra HD]

Revised audio mixes accompany each title in Warner's mega-hit franchise, and 4K visuals impress, not least the earlier flicks that buff up well. No Full HD discs included, nor extras. *HCC #282* ★★★★★



Spider-Man: Legacy Boxset [Ultra HD]

Sam Raimi's trilogy and the more recent *Amazing...* reboot movies are united in a boxset that impresses with its AV chops, surfeit of bonus bits and fan-pleasing packaging. *HCC #281* ★★★★★



Twin Peaks: A Limited Event Series

David Lynch's smallscreen return may not be quite what some *Twin Peaks* fans were expecting, but it remains a weird and hypnotic 18-episode show on a brilliant BD boxset. *HCC #281* ★★★★★

TOP 10 Soundbars & Soundbases



01 Yamaha YSP-5600SW →£1,900 ★★★★★
With its 46 drivers (including upfiring) this premium 'bar delivers precisely-steered and immersive audio, even of the Atmos variety. Potent wireless sub and 4K-capable HDMI switching sweeten the high-end deal. *HCC #254*



02 Canton DM55 →£330 ★★★★★
Canton's smallest soundbase still delivers big sonic thrills. Twin woofers underpin clean and crisp mids and highs, and build quality is first-rate. Doddle to use. Bluetooth built-in. *HCC #260*



03 Samsung HW-K950 →£1,300 ★★★★★
Soundbar with additional wireless rears and Dolby Atmos support via four upfiring drivers. Impressively largescale performance, good connectivity. No native DTS support. *HCC #263*



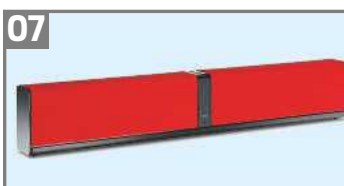
04 Samsung HW-MS750 / SWA-W700 →£700/£600 ★★★★★
Upfiring drivers on this premium 'bar, but no Atmos decoding. Performance still dazzles, and the optional sub shows its merits with movie soundmixes. *HCC #278*



05 Sony HT-ST5000 →£1,500 ★★★★★
High-end Dolby Atmos-capable soundbar/sub. Upfiring elevate the soundstage (but don't wraparound). Sound quality overall is excellent, blending muscle and depth with musicality. *HCC #275*



06 Q Acoustics M3 →£300 ★★★★★
A 4in x 6in woofer is tucked away in the M3's eye-catching angular chassis, ensuring this well-priced soundbar has a full-range performance. Simple to use. Bluetooth streaming. *HCC #271*



07 DALI Kubik One →£800 ★★★★★
The Danish speaker brand brings a slice of glamour to your setup with this stylish soundbar. No HDMI or digital decoding but it packs a tight, lively and nuanced sound. *HCC #269*



08 Q Acoustics M2 →£300 ★★★★★
Easily accommodated in/on AV furniture, and packing HDMI ARC for a simple hookup, this BMR-driver/ built-in woofer soundbase impresses with its energetic delivery and price. *HCC #279*



09 JBL Bar 5.1 →£650 ★★★★★
Switchable between stereo and 5.1 via battery-powered surround modules, this HDMI-toting package offers a cable-free multichannel solution. A 10in subwoofer underpins the soundfield. *HCC #283*



10 Sonos Playbase →£700 ★★★★★
Although this features the same foibles as the Sonos Playbar (no Bluetooth, no HDMI, no DTS), this multiroom maestro looks good and sounds good. Detailed, with naturalistic bass. *HCC #273*

TOP 5 Back-catalogue Blu-rays



Charley Varrick
Walter Matthau stars in and Don Siegel directs this superior 1973 bank robbery thriller, brought to UK Blu-ray by indie label Indicator. A great-looking Full HD transfer and excellent selection of extras. *HCC #283*
★★★★★



The Apartment
Plenty of effort has gone into restoring this Billy Wilder comedy – the result is a new BD transfer that looks wonderfully sharp, well-contrasted and clean, considering the film's 1960 vintage. *HCC #282*
★★★★★



Night of the Living Dead
The Criterion Collection pleases fans of George A. Romero's genre-defining 1968 horror with a labour-of-love two-disc BD release. Image quality benefits from a consistent 4K restoration; extras are plentiful. *HCC #283*
★★★★★



Suspiria: Limited Edition
Dario Argento's 1977 classic receives a second UK Blu-ray, with a new 4K restoration making amends for the previous lacklustre effort from 2010. Plenty of worthwhile extras; 5.1 DTS-HD MA audio. *HCC #282*
★★★★★



Interstellar [Ultra HD Blu-ray]
Refined 4K visuals, plus superb extras and audio ported across from the previous BD edition, make this UHD revisit of Chris Nolan's science-heavy sci-fi worth picking up. *HCC #282*
★★★★★

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buying, tuning or tweaking



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TOP 5 PVRs

**Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription**

This triple-tuner PVR offers recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and smart TiVo functionality. If you're in a cable area, consider it

★★★★★

**Sky Q, £subscription**

Sky's new top-tier product offering dazzles with its image-rich user interface, wireless multiroom skills and recording flexibility delivered by the PVR's 12 tuners. Now supports 4K content

★★★★★

**Humax FVP-5000T**

Revamped menus, faster operation and tweaks to its triple-tuner engine make this the most advanced Freeview Play PVR around – and it doubles admirably as a DLNA player/media jukebox. 500GB/1TB/2TB

★★★★★

**Humax DTR-T4000, £subscription**

This YouView-based PVR is required to get BT Sport's new Ultra HD channel – available to those with BT fast fibre and a BT TV sub. Easy to use and with 1TB of storage

★★★★★

**EE TV Smart Box £subscription**

This quad-tuner 1TB PVR, from the mobile/broadband corp, offers innovative Replay 24-hour channel recording and great Smart device streaming. Needs more catch-up though

★★★★★

TOP 5 Headphones

**Sony MDR-HW700DS, £800**

Comfy cans supplied with an HDMI surround processor, enabling multichannel audio to be fed to a virtual 9.1-channel soundstage. The effect is superb – great for late-night listening

★★★★★

**Sony MDR-1000X, £360**

Superior noise-cancelling cans with hi-res audio support via Sony's LDAC wireless transmission tech. Slick, touch-sensitive operation and healthy battery life. Fulsome sound and comfy to wear

★★★★★

**1More MK802, £150**

Ignore the bling-tastic blue or red finishes and focus on the assured sound performance from these well-priced closed-back cans. Features include wireless Bluetooth and app control (with burn-in mode). Great value

★★★★★

**Bowers & Wilkins PX, £330**

B&W adds noise-cancelling to the general spec of its previous P7 wireless cans, a welcome update for those seeking uninterrupted listening. Offers a neutral, balanced sound suited to both movies and music

★★★★★

**Audio Technica ATH-SR9, £400**

45mm drivers and Audio Technica's Midpoint Mount tech deliver wide, deep, spacious sonics. Memory foam padding aids listener comfort; 3m cable should suit most AV setups

★★★★★

TOP 5 Wireless speakers

**KEF Muo, £300**

Portable Bluetooth speaker that's a cut above much of the competition. KEF's sonic knowhow results in a punchy, dynamic presentation that cherishes lossless rips. Excellent build quality

★★★★★

**Sony SRS-X11, £60**

An affordable palm-sized Bluetooth speaker with internal rechargeable battery, Sony's SRS-X11 is supremely portable and sounds decent for the money. A neat little gizmo. Get two and they can work in stereo

★★★★★

**Q Acoustics BT3, £280**

Bluetooth stereo pair with optical input makes a good alternative to a soundbar (there's even a subwoofer pre-out) while remaining a dab hand at music. Neat and tidy design, good price

★★★★★

**Simple Audio Listen, £400**

Desktop stereo speakers with Bluetooth support, these benefit from separate tweeter/midbass units and a classy construction. Performance is well-balanced, and a subwoofer output is offered for extra bass

★★★★★

**Denon HEOS 5 HS2, £350**

The mid-range multiroom speaker gets a second-gen revamp, adding welcome hi-res audio playback and Bluetooth connectivity. Gorgeous looks, boisterous, room-filling sound

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA

Choice

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System builder Assembling AV setups for all budgets and needs

The Last Jedi Star Wars enters the 4K HDR era

Hollywood heroes The 2018 Summer blockbusters you can't afford to miss

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CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE – BUT ONLY FOR THE BETTER



AV Avenger

Steven Spielberg's *AI* may be portentous, but he completely missed the bit about robots calibrating your flatscreen TV, says **Steve May**

IN THE NOT too distant future, powerful technology will fine-tune your TV picture, making improvements on a weekly/daily/hourly basis, based on an ever evolving set of incomprehensible algorithms. At least, that's the extraordinary prospect now unfurling in TV R&D labs as engineers look for ways to exploit machine learning and neural networks. As regular readers will know, this is the sort of innovation that gets me excited.

As expected, the Korean giants are at the front of this tech push. LG has invested heavily in ThinQ, a product of its Artificial Intelligence Lab, that's platform agnostic and can run on Android, Linux and webOS, ostensibly providing a new level of interoperability between all sorts of devices. According to LG CTO Dr. I.P. Park, ThinQ will 'completely change the way consumers use products.' It'll roll out across multiple LG business divisions, and will turn up this year in both LG's OLED TVs and SK9 and SK10 soundbars. There's also a ThinQ-enabled smart speaker on the way.

In the short term, the tech is largely about simplifying control. TV owners will be able to change channels, alter volume and switch screen presets without recourse to button-pressing. But ThinQ isn't just about voice. It also supports video and sensor recognition, as well as spatial awareness and human body detection. LG says its ThinQ robot vacuum cleaner already knows the difference between a chair and a dog (cats, not so much).

It won't stop there. Products developed on a deep learning platform have the ability to become smarter over time. One example might be a smart lighting system that adjusts automatically to suit whoever is binge-watching *Jessica Jones* on Netflix.

And AI image processing is going to be crucial for 8K TV. Given there's no real prospect of native 8K

content for a good few years, panel manufacturers need an interim solution to kick-start their next premium TV category.

Samsung has been showcasing its refined AI technology that takes 4K (and lower) resolution sources and achieves close to a 7,680 x 4,320 image. It dubs this Machine Learning Super Resolution (MLSR); AI compares low- and high-quality versions of the same content, and interpolates what's missing.

MLSR will use a constantly updating database, based on millions of images, to upscale and refine image quality, employing a cocktail of smart technologies. A detail creation algorithm is tasked with improving texture in low-definition areas, while edge restoration improves pixel definition and advanced noise reduction compensates for image compression. MLSR will then intelligently apply filters for brightness, black level and colour.

The future is coming

This is extraordinarily powerful stuff, but it's not blue sky. Samsung says it will introduce MLSR on its first 85in 8K QLED TV later this year.

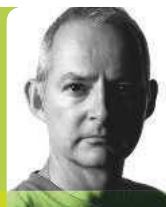
MLSR can even be applied to audio, perhaps adding emphasis to dialogue when required, and boosting ambient sound on a scene-by-scene basis.

The implications of such AV wizardry are immense, and the prospect of a TV which constantly refines its picture processing is looking increasingly real. In the home cinema of tomorrow, your movies could actually look and sound different every time you watch them.

It turns out Skynet doesn't want to kill us after all. It just wants to tweak our contrast ■

Would you trust an intelligent, automated calibration system? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

If **Steve May** had a pound for every time he heard something would 'change' the AV landscape, he wouldn't need to write this column





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UDP-203



“ Image quality
(including from
Dolby Vision titles)
is peerless ”



“ simply the best
movie source
available ”



“ You certainly
won't find a better
UHD Blu-ray player
on the market ”



“ that sense of awe
you get when
watching 4K films is
worth every penny ”



“ image quality
excels ”



“ it makes 4K
Blu-rays look more
beautiful than
they've ever looked
before ”

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“ There's a precision
here which is often
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so much, or executes it as
well. Its video performance
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